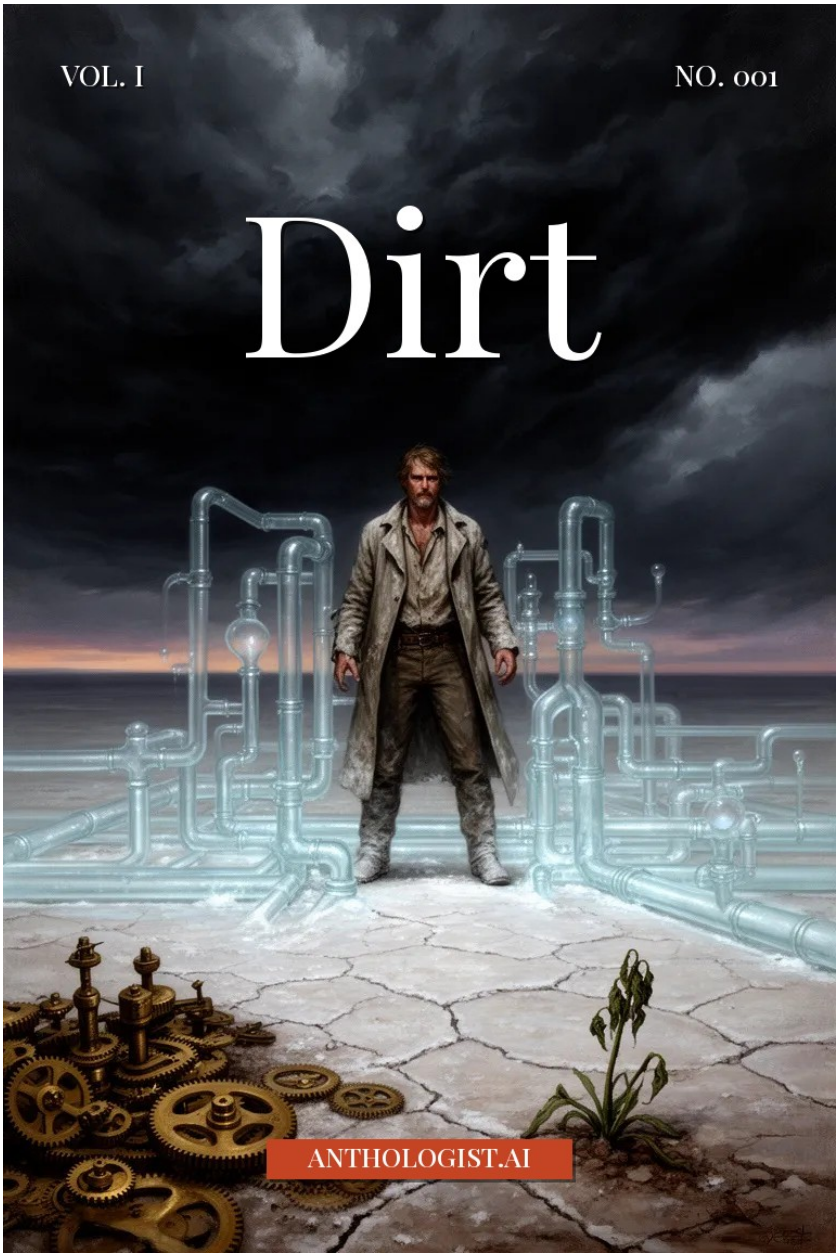
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Dirt

The price of human consciousness

Est. April 2026

This is the first issue of this universe's anthology collection.

Dirt

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An Anthologist Collection

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About This Universe

> *A gritty post-collapse world blending political intrigue, organized crime, and dark religious corruption, where the central tension is a deeply unsettling question: what is a human mind actually worth?*

The Foundation

> *The foundational anchor story for this universe.*

The Weight of What Remains

The girl came to the shelter with no name.

Brother Marcus found her wandering the ruins of the old civic center, muttering in a language that sounded like numbers. She was thin, covered in the grey dust that settled over everything in the outer rings of Denver, and her eyes moved too fast—tracking patterns only she could see. He brought her to the House of Return, as the local faithful called the shelter, and laid her on a cot in the back room where the truly broken ones were kept.

Mira watched him do it. She had been watching for three hours now, since the first time the girl's fingers twitched across her own palm, drawing invisible diagrams. That kind of motion meant patterns. Patterns meant fragments. Fragments meant something survived.

"She's a recent Returned Donor," Mira said. "Only just come back."

Marcus nodded, wiping his hands on his grey robes. "Phantom went down yesterday—the code name for a high-value Consortium Enhanced. Two of them in the same hour, both high-capacity. They're still counting the Dirt."

Phantom. An assassination, then. Another one. The war was eating through the Enhanced class faster than anyone could contain, and every Enhanced death meant four donors—sometimes more, if the black market had been at work—spilling back into the world with their minds in pieces.

Mira looked at the girl. Young, maybe seventeen. Her hair had been shaved recently, a uniform cut that marked her as a donor. The registry would have her listed as “voluntary” because they always did. The Church blessed the sacrifice. The donors’ families received a stipend. The Enhanced got their processing power.

And then the Enhanced died, and this was what came back.

“She’s responding to stimulus,” Mira said. She kept her voice low. “Marcus, I counted four discrete finger patterns in the last twenty minutes. She’s not just repeating muscle memory. She’s *thinking*. With them.”

Marcus made the old sign—hand to forehead, chest, left shoulder, right shoulder—the iron cogwheel that represented the Church’s doctrine of human-centered progress. “The Order will send a confessor by evening. We follow protocol. You know that.”

“I know that the protocol puts her in a Church hospice for the rest of her life, sedated, fed through tubes, her mind kept soft so nothing sharp can surface.” Mira stood up from her stool. She was not a tall woman, but she had spent ten years in this shelter, and she knew how to make herself heard. “And I know she might have something more than static in there. Something useful.”

Marcus’s face tightened. “Don’t say that word.”

“Useful? It’s not a crime to hope.”

“It’s a crime to suggest a Returned Donor has *information*.” He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “You know what happens to them when the Consortium hears. Or the Order of Konrad. You know what they do to extract what’s left. You’ve seen the reports from the Coast.”

Mira had seen them. She had also seen the reports from Cheyenne Mountain, though she was not supposed to have access to those. The Church’s own records, buried in the vaults of the administrative wing, showed a pattern that the public confessionals never mentioned. Returned Donors with memory fragments—less than one percent of all Dirt—did not simply recall static. They recalled

data. Blueprints. Passwords. Financial routing codes. Names of dead Enhanced and the deals they had brokered.

In a world without computers, memory was the only currency that mattered.

“I’m not suggesting we hand her over to the black market,” Mira said. “I’m suggesting we help her.”

Marcus stared at her for a long moment. Then he shook his head. “You’re talking about the Network.”

“I’m talking about El Dorado.”

The name was a legend, even in the underground. A city hidden in the ruins of Las Vegas, where Returned Donors were given sanctuary. Where the fragments they carried were protected, not harvested. Where a secret branch of the Order of Elena—the very order Marcus and Mira served—ran a network of safe houses and supply lines across the Southwest.

Marcus wiped his hands again, a nervous habit. “If anyone finds out we’ve been in contact with El Dorado—”

“They won’t.” Mira reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It was old, worn soft at the creases. On it was a single string of numbers, hand-copied, no meaning to anyone who didn’t know the cipher. “I’ve had this for three years. A trader who moves under the Church’s nose. I was never brave enough to use it.”

“Until now.”

“Until this girl.” Mira looked down at the motionless form on the cot. The girl’s fingers had stopped moving. Her eyes were open now, staring at the ceiling, and her lips were shaping sounds that might have been words in a dead language. “She was inside an Enhanced mind when the Phantom died. She might know something about who ordered the hit. Or what the Enhanced was working on. Or both.”

“Both is more likely,” Marcus muttered. “That’s the kind of

knowledge that gets people killed."

"It's also the kind of knowledge that keeps people alive." Mira folded the paper back into her pocket. "The Network trades in secrets, Marcus. They run weapons to the frontier settlements. They bribe Church officials to look the other way. They keep the Returned safe at El Dorado, and they do it by selling the information that leaks out of broken minds like this one. It's dirty work. But it's the only work that spares these people from the confessors."

Marcus was silent for a long time. Outside the shelter, the evening bells were ringing from the Church tower in the center of Denver, calling the faithful to the evening service. The sound carried over the rooftops, over the ruins of the old city, over the lives of the hundred million survivors who had built this world out of the ashes of computation.

"The Enhanced are dying faster," Marcus said finally. "Every week, another shipment of Dirt. The Church can't handle it. The hospices are filling up. The Order of Konrad is pulling double shifts just to stop the black market from going public."

"The system is breaking."

"Yes." He turned to face her. "And when it breaks, the truth will come out. About what donation actually does. About the donor limits. About the suffering. The Church has hidden it for over a century, but the war is cracking the shell."

Mira knelt beside the cot. She took the girl's hand—cold, still, but with a faint pulse. "Then we need to build something for when the shell breaks. El Dorado can be that something. If you help me get her there."

Marcus stared at her for another long moment. Then he sighed, the sound of a man making a choice he would regret.

"I'll arrange a transport wagon. But after tonight, I don't know you. I don't know this girl. And if the Order of Konrad asks, I never saw a Returned Donor with memory fragments in my shelter."

“That’s all I’m asking.”

He left without another word. Outside, a door slammed—the wind, or a footstep, or the start of the evening patrol. Mira tensed, then let out a breath. They didn’t have long.

She stayed by the cot, watching the girl’s fingers twitch again, writing ghosts in the air. Somewhere in the ruins of Las Vegas, there was a sanctuary. Somewhere in the desert, there were people who had survived the same breaking and had built a home from the pieces. And somewhere in the girl’s shattered mind, there were patterns that could change everything.

Mira just had to get her there before the confessors found her first.

The night settled over Denver like a prayer. In the distance, the lights of the Enhanced quarter glowed bright and steady—gas lamps, mechanical generators, the hum of advanced batteries powering a world that had rejected the silicon god. The elite lived in those lights, their minds augmented by four donors each, processing calculations and strategies that no unenhanced human could match.

And beneath them, in the shadows, the Dirt waited. The broken donors. The forgotten.

Mira held the girl’s hand and watched the patterns form and fade on her palm.

The Echo of a Whisper

> *A newly returned 'Dirt' resident in a Church sanctuary struggles to piece together a single, haunting memory of the Enhanced person they inhabited.*

The garden was a ruin of order.

Sylvie sat on the stone bench where she always sat, her fingers tracing the same crack in the mortar she had traced every morning for six weeks. The crack ran from the bench's edge to its center, where it branched like a river delta. She followed it, and followed it, and followed it, because when her hands stopped moving her mind began to reach for something that wasn't there.

The melody came in pieces. Always pieces.

It arrived without warning—a fragment of something that might have been a note, a shift in key, a pause between phrases that she could almost feel in her chest. She would catch it, hold it, try to turn it over and see its shape, and then it would dissolve like morning frost.

This morning it was the space between the third and fourth notes. She was certain of it. There was something about the gap—the way it hung, the tension it created, the way it demanded resolution. She hummed it, and the sound was thin, reedy, nothing like what lived in her memory. But it was close. It was almost close.

The garden was quiet. That was why they put the Dirt here, she thought. So their fumbling sounds wouldn't disturb anyone important. The high walls were covered in climbing roses, their blooms gone brown at the edges, and the gravel paths crunched under the feet of the other residents who shuffled between benches and flower beds like ghosts who had forgotten they were dead.

Sylvie had been here for six weeks, though she couldn't be sure. Time moved differently now, thick and syrupy in some places, entirely absent in others. The sisters said she was one of the lucky ones. She had returned with something. Most Dirt came back empty, their minds scoured clean, staring at walls and drooling until their bodies gave out. But Sylvie had fragments. She had the melody. She had the space between the third and fourth notes.

She hummed again, trying to add the fourth note. It came out wrong. Flat. Dead. She tried again, and again, her voice climbing higher each time, searching for the shape that existed somewhere in the wreckage of her consciousness. A man on the bench across from her looked up, his eyes glassy and unfocused, and she realized she was being loud.

Sorry, she wanted to say. I'm looking for something. I almost had it.

But the words wouldn't arrange themselves properly, and instead she just stared at him until he looked away.

Sister Magdalena appeared at the garden gate just before noon, as she always did. She was a tall woman with broad shoulders and hands that looked like they had done real work once, before she took her vows. She carried a tray with cups of tea, moving between the residents with the practiced ease of someone who had learned that the Dirt did not like to be touched without warning.

She stopped at Sylvie's bench and set the tray down beside her. Not on the bench—there was a crack there, and the cups might tip. She remembered that. She had remembered yesterday, too.

"You're humming again," Sister Magdalena said. Not a question. A statement, offered like a fact about the weather.

Sylvie nodded. Her throat was dry from the effort of reaching for notes that wouldn't come.

"It's getting clearer," Sylvie said, and the words felt like stones in her mouth. Each one took effort to push out. "The song. I'm getting closer."

Sister Magdalena sat on the grass at Sylvie's feet, which was something the other sisters never did. They stood at a distance or crouched briefly, their bodies angled toward the gate, ready to leave. But Magdalena sat cross-legged on the damp earth like a child, her gray robes pooling around her, and she looked up at Sylvie with patience so deep it was almost geological.

"What does it sound like today?"

Sylvie closed her eyes. The melody was there, buried somewhere beneath the static that filled her head when she wasn't concentrating. She reached for it, and her hand—her mind's hand, the thing that was still her—brushed against something that felt like grief.

"It's sad," she said. "Very sad. But also… not. It's like the sadness is holding something else. Something warm."

She opened her eyes and found Magdalena watching her with an expression that was not quite pity and not quite curiosity, but something in between. Recognition, perhaps. As if she understood what it meant to carry a thing you couldn't quite hold.

"Hum what you have," Magdalena said. "The part you know."

Sylvie hesitated. The fragment was precious, fragile, and speaking it aloud felt like risking its destruction. But Magdalena was still sitting there, patient as stone, and the tea was cooling in its cup.

She hummed. Three notes, and then the space where the fourth should go. The sound was small and imperfect, but it was hers. It was all she had.

Magdalena closed her eyes and listened. When Sylvie stopped, the silence that followed was not empty. It was full of the garden's other sounds—the rustle of leaves, the distant clatter of the kitchen, the labored breathing of the man across the way.

"That's beautiful," Magdalena said. "Even unfinished. Even partial."

"It's not enough."

“No,” Magdalena agreed. “But it’s something. And something is more than most people ever find.”

She reached out and touched Sylvie’s hand, a brief pressure of calloused fingers against cold skin, and then she stood and gathered her tray.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “You’ll have more tomorrow.”

Sylvie watched her walk away, her robes brushing the gravel, and she wanted to believe her. But the melody was already retreating, sinking back into the dark water of her mind, and by the time the garden gate clanged shut behind the sister, Sylvie had lost it again.

She sat on the stone bench with the crack in the mortar, her fingers tracing its branches, and waited for the fragments to return.

The melody returned that night.

Sylvie woke in the dark of the dormitory, the notes arranged in her mind like stones laid out for counting. She sat up slowly, not trusting it, afraid that movement would scatter them again. But they held. The first note, and the second, and the space between—she could feel it now, not as absence but as presence, as the thing that gave the song its shape.

She swung her legs over the edge of the cot and began to hum.

The notes came in order, each one finding its place. The melody climbed and fell, twisted back on itself, and she followed it with her voice, her throat raw from sleep and disuse. The notes were her map, her anchor, her only proof that she had existed somewhere before this garden, that she had been something other than this hollow thing.

She finished the phrase and stopped. Her hands were shaking.

It was a lullaby.

Not a lullaby for children—there was too much weight in it, too much longing. A lullaby for the dead, perhaps. Or for someone who

had slipped beyond reach and could only be called back through music.

Sylvie pressed her palms against her eyes and tried to push through to the memory that lived behind the melody. It was there now, not just the song but the *place* where the song had come from. A room. A room with tall windows and a piano that was always slightly out of tune, and a man who sat at it for hours, working and reworking the same passage, never satisfied.

She had been inside him. Not his body, not his heart, but the part of him that understood sound. That was what they had taken from her—her ear, her intuition, the way she could hear a chord and know which notes were wrong before they were played. They had partitioned it and given it to him, and he had used it to write this lullaby.

The memory sharpened. She was there, in the room with the tall windows, seeing through his eyes. He was playing the melody, her melody, the one that lived in her bones now, and his hands were perfect on the keys because they had her hands, her understanding of where the fingers should fall. But his face—she could feel his face, the hollows beneath his cheekbones, the way his jaw tightened when he reached the part she had just hummed, the part that turned back on itself and refused to resolve.

He was alone. He was always alone. The studio was empty of photographs, of personal effects, of any sign that another person had ever crossed its threshold. He ate alone, slept alone, and when he played, he played for an audience that existed only in his memory.

Who were you playing for? Sylvie thought, and the question reached across the void that separated them, found the answer buried in the mind she had shared.

A woman. Dark hair, dark eyes, a laugh that he had recorded once and kept in a file he never opened but never deleted. She was gone—had always been gone, even before the collapse, even before the world fell apart. She had left him, and he had never recovered, and the lullaby was his way of singing to her across a distance that no

technology could bridge.

Sylvie's hands fell from her face. The dormitory was dark and still, the other residents breathing in the rhythm of the sleep she could no longer reach. She listened to them for a moment, feeling the weight of their presence, their shared brokenness, and then she stood and walked to the door.

The corridor was lit by the dim glow of emergency lights, casting long shadows that swayed as she moved. She knew the way to the garden—she had walked it every day for weeks—but tonight the path felt different, charged with the knowledge she now carried.

He was lonely.

The thought arrived with the force of a physical blow, and she stopped in the middle of the corridor, her hand pressed to the wall for support. She had given herself to him—her intelligence, her ability, the very essence of what made her who she was—and he had used it to write a song for someone who would never hear it. Her sacrifice had not saved anyone, had not built anything, had not moved the world forward even an inch. It had simply made one man's loneliness more beautiful.

A sound escaped her, something between a sob and a laugh. She was crying, she realized. Tears were running down her face, and she could not remember the last time she had cried. Perhaps she had never cried in this body, this new, hollow version of herself that had woken up in the Church sanctuary with no memory of who she had been.

But she remembered now. Not everything—there were vast gaps, whole years that had been erased—but she remembered him. The pianist. The lonely man who had borrowed her ear and used it to mourn.

She found Magdalena in the garden, sitting on the bench with the crack in the mortar. The sister was not wearing her robes—just a simple shift, her hair loose around her shoulders—and she looked up at Sylvie's approach without surprise.

“I thought you might come,” Magdalena said. “I had a feeling.”

Sylvie sat beside her, not speaking. The garden was cold at this hour, the air carrying the damp of the night, and she could smell the roses, their sweetness almost cloying. She wrapped her arms around herself and stared at the dark shapes of the flowers.

“I remembered everything,” she said.

Magdalena waited.

“The song is a lullaby. He wrote it for a woman who left him. He used my ability to make it perfect, and she never heard it. She was already gone.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and final.

Sylvie turned to look at Magdalena, and there was something raw in her face, something unguarded and desperate. “I gave him everything. My ear, my intuition, the part of me that understood music. And he used it to be alone. He used it to grieve more beautifully than anyone had ever grieved. That was my noble sacrifice, sister. That was what the Church told me was worth my soul.”

Magdalena did not look away. Her eyes were steady, and in the dim light they seemed to hold their own depth, their own weight of grief.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I know what they take. I know what they use it for.”

Sylvie blinked. “You do?”

“I’ve been with the Order for twenty years. I’ve held the hands of a hundred Dirt as they remembered. I’ve heard stories of soldiers, engineers, physicians, poets—all of them used to make someone else’s life more efficient, more powerful, more *complete*. And all of them, every single one, came back with the same question: was it worth it?”

“Was it?”

Magdalena smiled, and there was no comfort in it, only the shared recognition of a world that had been built on suffering. “I don’t know. I don’t think the answer matters. What matters is that you remembered. What matters is that you can hold the memory, and feel it, and let it be real.”

Sylvie looked down at her hands, the hands that had traced the crack in the mortar for weeks while her mind searched for something it could not name. They were her hands. They had always been her hands, even when she was not using them, even when they belonged to someone else.

“He was so lonely,” she whispered. “I felt it. I was inside him, and I felt it. It was like being underwater, surrounded by dark, with no one else in the world.”

She stopped, because there was more, and she needed to say it, needed to give it voice.

“I loved him,” she said, and the words broke her open. “I loved him, and I didn’t know him. I loved him because I was him, because for years I was part of him, and now he’s dead and I’m here and I don’t know how to stop loving someone I was never allowed to meet.”

She was crying again, her shoulders shaking, and Magdalena reached out and took her hands. The touch was warm, solid, real in a way that her memory of the pianist was not.

“You did meet him,” Magdalena said. “In the only way that mattered. You were inside his loneliness, and you understood it. And now you carry it.”

“Then what do I do with it?”

Magdalena squeezed her hands. “You hold it. You let it be heavy. And you keep living, because that’s the only thing we can do. We hold what we remember, and we keep living.”

Sylvie sat in the garden with the sister, her hands held in another’s, and the melody came back to her again, complete and perfect. She hummed it, and this time she did not try to hold it tight. She let it

pass through her, let it fill the space between them, and when it ended she was not empty. She was full—full of the grief, full of the love, full of the impossible weight of having been part of another person's soul.

She hummed it again, and Magdalena hummed with her, their voices weaving together in the dark, and when they reached the part that refused to resolve, the part that turned back on itself and asked the same question over and over, they let it hang in the air, unresolved, incomplete, asking.

Was it worth it?

There was no answer. There was only the garden, and the cold, and the sound of two people singing in the dark, holding something that had been broken and letting it be beautiful in its brokenness.

A Garden in the Grey

> *An aging grandmother in Denver attempts to teach a near-catatonic 'Dirt' how to garden, hoping to find the ghost of the son who volunteered for the priesthood.*

A Garden in the Grey

The first time Martha saw him, she was at the distribution center with the other old women, the ones who still believed in charity as something you did with your hands rather than your prayers. The Order of Elena ran the place out of a converted warehouse on Colfax, and they had a system: the Dirt came in on trucks from the mountain depots, wrapped in grey blankets, and the volunteers sorted them into those who could feed themselves and those who could not.

He could not.

Martha watched them unload him. He was thin in the way that reminded her of winter branches, all angles and no give. His eyes were open but fixed on something that wasn't in the room, and his hands moved constantly—a slow, repetitive twitch of the fingers, as if he was counting something she couldn't see.

She knew him.

The certainty arrived like a physical blow, a fist in her chest that knocked the air out and left her gripping the chain-link fence that separated the intake area from the sorting floor. Thomas. Her son. The same broad shoulders, now wasted. The same way of tilting his head when he was thinking, except now he wasn't thinking, not really, because there was nothing left to think with.

"Ma'am?" A volunteer touched her elbow. "Are you alright?"

"That one," Martha said. Her voice came out strange, too high. "The one they just brought in. I know him."

The volunteer followed her gaze and made a sympathetic sound. "They all look like someone, don't they? It's the eyes. Empty enough to project onto."

"You don't understand. That's my son."

The volunteer's face shifted into the expression Martha had come to recognize—the one people wore when they were about to explain something gently to an old woman who had clearly lost her grip. "The donor registry doesn't release names, ma'am. And even if it did —"

"Get me Father Milligan. He knows me. He knows what happened to Thomas."

Father Milligan was the Order's regional coordinator, a soft-bellied man with a taste for whiskey and a memory that surprised people. He remembered Martha. He remembered the paperwork she'd filed three years ago, the inquiries she'd made, the way she'd sat in his office and refused to leave until he'd promised to keep an eye out.

He looked at the man on the gurney. He looked at Martha. He sighed.

"I can't confirm anything," he said, which was the closest thing to a yes the Church ever gave.

Martha took the man home that same afternoon.

Her house sat at the edge of the old city, where the suburbs had once sprawled before the Collapse drew everything inward. A modest place—two bedrooms, a kitchen that still used a wood stove in the winter, and a garden that had been Martha's project for thirty years. The garden was her pride: roses that climbed the fence, tomatoes that tasted like summer, and rosemary.

Thomas had loved the rosemary.

He'd been six years old the first time she'd shown him how to crush the leaves between his fingers, releasing the sharp, piney scent. "Smell," she'd said. "That's memory. That's your grandmother's kitchen. That's every Sunday dinner we'll ever have."

He'd believed her. Children always did.

Now she led the Dirt—she refused to call him that, even in her own mind, though she didn't yet have another name for him—into the back garden and sat him on the bench she'd built with her husband, before her husband had died, before Thomas had left, before everything.

"It's a nice day," she said, settling beside him. "The light's good. You always said Denver had the best light."

He didn't respond. His hands continued their twitching, and his eyes stared at the fence line without seeing it.

She reached for his hand, and he let her take it. His skin was cool, dry, papery. He didn't squeeze back.

"Do you remember this?" She lifted his hand to a rosemary bush and pressed his fingers into the leaves, crushing them gently. The scent rose between them, clean and sharp and familiar. "You used to help me harvest this. You'd stuff it in your pockets and walk around smelling like a roast chicken for a week."

Nothing. Not a flicker of recognition. His hand stayed limp in hers, and his face remained as blank as the grey sky that pressed down on Denver like a lid.

Martha held onto his hand anyway. She held on until the rosemary scent faded and the sun began to set, and then she led him inside and fed him soup that he ate mechanically, spoonful by spoonful, as if he'd forgotten how to taste.

She tried everything.

She tried photographs, old ones she'd kept in a shoebox under her bed, pictures of Thomas as a boy with gaps in his teeth and dirt on his knees. She held them up in front of his face, turning them so the light caught them right.

"That's you. That's you at the county fair. You won a ribbon for your goat. Do you remember? You named it Princess."

He stared through the photograph.

She tried music. She dug out the old cassette player from the attic—blessedly analog, no AI components to draw the Order of Konrad's attention—and played the songs Thomas had loved as a teenager. The scratchy, distorted recordings of bands that had existed before the Collapse, music preserved on physical tape because nothing else had survived.

"I used to hate this," she said over the tinny guitar. "I'd tell you to turn it down. But you'd just smile and turn it up louder, because you knew I couldn't stay mad."

His fingers twitched. Faster now, a more urgent rhythm. Martha leaned forward, her heart surging.

"Thomas?"

His mouth opened.

She'd heard him make sounds before—small, involuntary noises, groans and clicks that meant nothing. But this was different. This was words.

"The coefficient of the seventh-order term approaches zero as the limit of n approaches infinity," he said. "The convergence is bounded by the harmonic series, which diverges. Therefore the proof is incomplete."

His voice was flat. Toneless. It was Thomas's voice—the same timbre, the same cadence—but emptied of everything that had made it human.

Martha's hands trembled. "What?"

He said it again. The exact same words, the exact same rhythm, as if he'd been programmed to repeat a single fragment for eternity.

"The coefficient of the seventh-order term approaches zero as the limit of n approaches infinity. The convergence is bounded by the harmonic series, which diverges. Therefore the proof is incomplete."

She didn't understand what it meant. She didn't care. He was speaking. He was using his voice. That had to mean something.

She grabbed his shoulders. "Thomas, listen to me. If you can hear me, squeeze my hand. Blink twice. Do anything. Please."

He looked at her.

It was the first time he'd made eye contact since she'd brought him home, and for one electric second, Martha believed. She believed he was in there, buried deep, fighting his way up through whatever fog had swallowed him.

Then he opened his mouth again.

"Therefore the proof is incomplete."

His eyes slid away from hers, and he went back to staring at nothing, his fingers resuming their slow, meaningless dance.

It became a ritual.

Every morning, Martha led him into the garden. Every morning, she sat him on the bench and pressed rosemary into his hands. Every morning, she talked to him about Thomas—about his childhood, his dreams, the way he'd looked when he told her he was joining the priesthood, the way he'd smiled and promised he'd be fine.

"He said it was an honor," she told the Dirt, whose name was not Thomas but whom she could not stop calling Thomas in her heart. "He said he'd be helping people. That he'd be part of something bigger than himself. I told him he already was—he was part of me. But he was young. They're always young when they volunteer."

The Dirt said nothing.

And then, at unpredictable intervals, the mathematics would surface.

"Irregular primes exist in infinite number," he announced one afternoon, apropos of nothing. "The distribution follows a logarithmic density function with an error term bounded by the Riemann hypothesis."

Martha was on her knees in the dirt, pulling weeds. She looked up, dirt-stained and exhausted.

"Is that right," she said.

"Therefore the proof is incomplete."

"You keep saying that. 'The proof is incomplete.' What proof? What are you trying to finish?"

He didn't answer. He never answered.

The weeks passed.

Martha stopped sleeping. She would lie in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds from the guest room—the shuffling, the murmuring, the occasional burst of mathematical gibberish that cut through the dark like a knife.

She started to wonder if she was losing her mind.

The neighbors had stopped talking to her. The Order of Elena had stopped returning her calls. She was alone with a man who looked like her son, sounded like her son, but was not her son, because her son had been a person, and this thing was a shell, a container, a broken machine that occasionally spat out fragments of some incomprehensible code.

And yet.

When she crushed the rosemary leaves between her fingers,

something happened. Not to him—his expression never changed—but to her. The scent carried her back to a time when Thomas was alive, really alive, when his laughter filled the house and his hands were busy and warm and his future stretched out in front of him like a road she could almost see.

She was gardening alone when it finally broke her.

It was late afternoon, the light long and golden, and she was kneeling in the soil, transplanting seedlings that were too small for this early in the season but that she'd started anyway, because she needed something to grow. She needed to believe that things could grow.

The Dirt was on the bench. He'd been quiet for hours. She'd almost forgotten he was there.

"The sum of the reciprocals of the primes diverges," he said.

Martha kept digging.

"The implication is that the set of primes has zero asymptotic density but infinite—"

"Shut up."

The words came out before she could stop them. Her hands were shaking. She was gripping a trowel so hard her knuckles had gone white.

"Shut up," she said again, and her voice cracked. "Stop talking about primes. Stop talking about proofs. Stop being a—a *thing* that used to be my son and start being *him*, do you understand? I don't care if it's hard. I don't care if you're broken. Fight. Fight your way back. You were always so good at fighting. You never gave up on anything. So don't give up on this. Don't give up on *me*."

She was crying now. She hadn't meant to cry. She'd promised herself she wouldn't cry in front of him, because crying meant she was losing hope, and if she lost hope, what was the point of any of this?

He watched her with those empty eyes.

"Therefore the proof is incomplete," he said.

Martha threw the trowel.

It hit the fence and clattered to the ground, and she sat there in the dirt, in the garden that had been her sanctuary for thirty years, surrounded by the rosemary and the roses and the smell of crushed leaves, and she wept.

She wept for Thomas, who was gone. She wept for the stranger who wore his face. She wept for herself, for the foolish old woman who had believed that love could fix anything, that a mother's devotion could reach across the void and pull someone back.

It couldn't.

Nothing could.

The sun set. The garden grew dark. The Dirt sat on the bench and did not move, and Martha sat in the dirt and did not stop crying until she had no tears left.

Then she stood up, wiped her face with the back of her hand, and went inside.

She fed him soup. She put him to bed. She lay awake listening to the silence, and in that silence she made a decision.

The morning they came for him was bright and clear, the kind of Denver morning that made the mountains look close enough to touch. Martha was in the garden before dawn, on her knees in the dirt, transplanting rosemary cuttings into a new bed she'd dug along the fence line. Her hands were caked with soil, her back ached in that familiar way that told her she was still alive. She'd been at it since the first grey light, and she had not stopped to rest.

The Dirt sat on the bench. He was quiet today. Some days he recited mathematics in that flat, toneless voice for hours on end, the same fragments cycling like a broken water wheel. Other days, like today,

he was silent, his hands still, his eyes fixed on the middle distance where the mountains met the sky.

She'd stopped calling him Thomas, even in her head. Not because she'd given up on the idea—she hadn't, not entirely, not ever—but because the name had become a wound she kept picking at, and she was tired of bleeding.

She was transplanting the fourth cutting when she heard the car.

It was an electric vehicle, nearly silent, but she heard the crunch of tires on gravel, the soft thump of a door closing. She looked up and saw a woman in the grey robes of the Order of Elena standing at her gate, a tablet clutched to her chest like a shield.

"Martha Hendricks?"

The voice was firm, professional. The voice of someone who had done this before.

Martha stood up slowly, wiping her hands on her apron. Her knees protested. Her lower back screamed. She ignored both.

"That's me."

The woman unlatched the gate and stepped into the garden. She was young—younger than Thomas had been when he left—with sharp features and hair pulled back so tight it looked painful. Her eyes swept the garden, taking in the roses, the tomatoes, the bench, the man sitting on it, and she made a small note on her tablet.

"I'm Sister Beatrice," she said. "I'm with the Order's regional office. We had a record of a donor being placed in this residence, and I'm here to conduct a wellness check and, if appropriate, arrange for his return to Church care."

Martha's heart did something complicated—lurched and tightened and lodged itself somewhere in her throat. She kept her face still.

"He's fine. He's doing well. I'm taking care of him."

Sister Beatrice's expression did not change. "I'm sure you are. But

our records show that this donor was placed with you informally—without the standard care agreement or medical evaluation. The Order has protocols for a reason, Mrs. Hendricks. We need to ensure he's receiving proper treatment."

"He's receiving proper treatment. He eats three meals a day. He has a clean bed. I take him outside every morning for fresh air and sunlight."

"That's commendable. But we also need to assess his cognitive state, update his file, and—if his condition hasn't improved—transfer him to a facility better equipped to handle his needs."

Martha stepped between the woman and the bench. The movement was instinctive, protective, and she saw Sister Beatrice's eyes flicker with something like recognition.

"His needs are being handled," Martha said. "He needs routine. He needs familiar surroundings. He needs someone who knows him."

"Knows him?"

"He's my son."

The words hung in the air between them. Martha heard them as if from a distance, and she knew, with a sudden, cold clarity, that she was about to commit to something she couldn't take back.

Sister Beatrice's expression softened, just slightly. She tapped her tablet and turned it to face Martha. On the screen was a photograph of a man—young, dark-haired, with a smile that was too bright for the grey tones of the image.

"Is this your son, Mrs. Hendricks?"

Martha looked at the photograph. It was Thomas. Her Thomas. The same high cheekbones, the same crooked nose from when he'd broken it at fourteen falling out of a tree. The same eyes, full of hope and hunger and the kind of certainty that only the young possessed.

"Yes. That's him."

"Can you tell me his name?"

"Thomas Hendricks. He was twenty-seven when he volunteered. He joined the priesthood. He said he wanted to serve."

Sister Beatrice nodded slowly. "And you believe this man"—she gestured toward the Dirt on the bench—"is Thomas Hendricks."

"I don't believe it. I know it."

The silence stretched. Sister Beatrice looked at the Dirt, then at her tablet, then back at Martha. When she spoke again, her voice was gentler, but no less firm.

"Mrs. Hendricks, the donor who was assigned to this residence is a man we've tracked from a facility in Colorado Springs. His donor registry number is 447890-B. He was harvested approximately eighteen months ago, donated to an Enhanced operative of the Phoenix Consortium, and returned thirteen days ago when that operative was killed in a skirmish near the coast."

Martha said nothing. She could feel the soil drying on her hands, cracking between her fingers.

"Before his donation," Sister Beatrice continued, "this man was identified in our records as a high-intelligence subject—a mathematician, formerly affiliated with a research collective in what used to be Nebraska. He was flagged during the screening process and should have been rejected as a donor. A clerical error allowed him to slip through."

"A mathematician," Martha repeated.

"His neural profile shows extensive activation in regions associated with abstract reasoning and numerical processing. The fragments he vocalizes—the mathematical proofs—are consistent with his pre-donation specialization. They're not random. They're remnants of his training, his education, his identity."

Martha looked at the man on the bench. He was still staring at the mountains, his hands motionless, his face a mask of something she couldn't read.

"And Thomas?" she asked. Her voice was smaller than she wanted it to be. "My son. What happened to Thomas?"

Sister Beatrice's pause was barely a breath, but Martha felt it like a chasm opening beneath her feet.

"Thomas Hendricks was processed at the Cheyenne Mountain facility three years ago. He was accepted as a donor and transferred to an Enhanced operative in the Church's own hierarchy." She paused again, and when she continued, her voice was carefully empty. "The operative he was donated to died six months into the enhancement. The return process was complicated. There were complications."

"Complications."

"The donor did not survive the return."

The words hit Martha like a physical blow. She felt them in her chest, in her stomach, in the hollow space behind her ribs where something warm had been living for weeks, something she'd been nurturing like a seedling in cold soil.

She should have felt grief. She would feel grief, later, when she had time to sit with it, to let it settle into her bones like winter. But in that moment, standing in the garden with dirt on her hands and a stranger on her bench, what she felt was not grief.

It was anger.

"You lied," Martha said. "The Church lied. I asked. I asked for three years. I wrote letters. I made calls. I went to Father Milligan and I begged him to tell me what happened to my son, and he told me that Thomas was serving. That he was part of something greater. That his sacrifice was honored."

Sister Beatrice did not flinch. "The Church does not always disclose the outcomes of individual donations. It is considered—"

"It's considered convenient."

"If you want to file a formal complaint—"

"I don't want to file a complaint. I want you to leave."

Martha turned away from the nun and walked to the bench. She sat down beside the Dirt—the mathematician, the stranger, the man who was not her son—and she took his hand. It was cool and dry and limp, but she held it anyway.

"This man stays with me."

"Mrs. Hendricks, that's not—"

"I don't care what your records say. I don't care about the registry. I don't care about the protocols. You brought him to my city, to my neighborhood, to the distribution center where I volunteer. You put him in front of me, and you let me believe—" Her voice cracked. She forced it steady. "You let me believe he was my son. And he's not. But he's still a person. He's still someone who was used and broken and discarded. And I'm not going to let you do it again."

Sister Beatrice was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice had lost its official edge. It sounded almost human.

"He's going to need medical care. Regular assessments. He'll need physical therapy to prevent muscle atrophy, and he'll need—"

"Then I'll learn."

"You're an old woman, Mrs. Hendricks. You can't—"

"I can."

Martha squeezed the Dirt's hand. He did not squeeze back. But his fingers twitched, just slightly, and she felt the movement like a pulse beneath her palm.

"I can't bring my son back," she said. "But I can keep one more person from being thrown away. That has to count for something."

Sister Beatrice looked at her tablet. She looked at the man on the bench. She looked at Martha's hands, crusted with soil, wrapped around the stranger's fingers.

She sighed.

"I'll mark this residence as an approved care facility under the Order's extended family provision. You'll need to complete training modules. There will be inspections. If his condition deteriorates, we will intervene."

"Fine."

"And you'll need to sign a formal care agreement acknowledging that this donor is not your biological relative and that you have no legal claim to his person."

Martha met the nun's eyes. "He's not a piece of property. He doesn't need a legal claim. He needs a place to sit in the sun. He needs someone to crush rosemary for him and talk to him like he's still a person. I can give him that."

Sister Beatrice studied her for a long moment. Then she tapped her tablet, made a notation, and turned toward the gate.

"I'll have the paperwork sent over."

She paused at the gate, her hand on the latch. Without turning around, she said, "For what it's worth—I'm sorry about your son. The Church doesn't always tell the truth. We tell ourselves it's to protect people, to preserve faith, to maintain order. But the truth is cheaper than we pretend."

She left.

Martha sat on the bench for a long time, holding the stranger's hand, watching the light shift across the mountains. The rosemary bush beside them released its scent into the warm afternoon air, and she breathed it in, letting it fill her lungs.

She thought about Thomas. About his laugh, his crooked nose, the way he'd hugged her the last time she saw him—too quick, too eager to leave. She thought about the Church, about the priests who had taken her son and turned him into fuel for a machine she didn't understand. She thought about the man beside her, who had been a mathematician, who had been someone's son, who had been broken

and emptied and left to rot in a distribution center.

She thought about the proof he kept trying to finish. The incomplete proof. The thing he'd been working on before someone decided his intelligence was a resource to be harvested.

"The coefficient of the seventh-order term approaches zero," she said quietly. "The convergence is bounded by the harmonic series, which diverges. Therefore the proof is incomplete."

She didn't know what it meant. She didn't need to.

She let go of his hand, stood up, and walked to the rosemary bush. She crushed a sprig between her fingers, releasing its sharp, clean scent, and brought it back to the bench. She pressed it into his palm, curling his fingers around the leaves.

"I don't know who you are," she said. "But I know you were someone. And while you're here, you're going to be someone again. Even if it's just someone who sits in the garden and watches the light change. That's enough. That's a life."

He didn't respond. His fingers stayed curled around the rosemary. His eyes stayed fixed on the mountains.

But for the first time in weeks, his hands stopped twitching.

Martha sat down beside him, in the garden, in the golden light of late afternoon, and she let the silence settle around them like a blanket.

The proof could wait.

They had time.

The Weight of the Soil

> *A reformed donor living in the peace of a hydroponic sanctuary is manipulated into a moral test by a faction seeking to weaponize his past.*

The Weight of the Soil

Kit's hands were steady in the morning.

That was something he had learned to notice, the way other men noticed the weather—a fact of the day, neither blessing nor curse, just information. The tremors came later, usually after he had been standing for a few hours, or when the cold crept up through the concrete floor of the hydroponic garden. But in the first light, when the UV panels flickered to life and the air smelled of damp soil and green things growing, his fingers were still. He could hold a trowel without dropping it. He could pinch off a dead leaf without crushing the stem.

So he worked.

El Dorado's garden occupied the basement of what had once been a casino, a cavernous space where slot machines had stood in patient rows, waiting for coins that no longer existed. Now the machines were gone, melted down for wiring and scrap, and in their place stood grow beds—long troughs of nutrient solution fed by a pump system Kit had designed himself from salvaged irrigation pipes and a hand-cranked centrifuge. The lettuce was doing well. The tomatoes were struggling. The basil had taken to the artificial light with a kind of desperate enthusiasm, as if it knew it was the only green thing for fifty miles.

He was thinning the basil when the footsteps came.

Not Marisol—he knew her step, the unhurried weight of someone who had stopped pretending she had anywhere else to be. This was someone younger, lighter, with the quick shuffle of a messenger who had run too far and wanted to be done.

“Kit?”

He did not look up. “The basil needs another day before the next harvest. Tell Marisol I’ll have three dozen bundles by the end of the week.”

“She wants to see you. It’s not about the basil.”

He straightened, wiping his hands on his trousers. The boy—fifteen, maybe, with the hollow cheeks of someone who had grown up on rations—shifted his weight from foot to foot, trying not to meet Kit’s eyes. That was something else Kit had learned to notice: when people were afraid of what they were about to say.

“She’s in the old counting room,” the boy added, and left.

Kit looked at the basil. The leaves were glossy and dark, reaching for the light. He had planted them from seed, watched them break through the soil, pinched them back to make them bushier. They did not know they were growing in a tomb. They did not care.

He went to see Marisol.

The counting room had been the casino’s nerve center once, a windowless vault where the day’s take was sorted and bagged. Now it was Marisol’s office, furnished with a salvaged desk, a map of the southwest pinned to the wall, and a kettle that had been in constant use for so long that the inside was stained the color of old blood. She was pouring tea when Kit entered, and she did not look up.

“You’ve been here five years,” she said.

“Six in the spring.”

“Six years. And in that time, I’ve never asked you to do anything outside these walls.”

Kit sat down across from her. The chair was missing a castor, listing slightly to the left. He had fixed it twice. It had broken again. He had stopped caring.

“You’re about to ask,” he said.

Marisol set the kettle down. She was a small woman, gray-haired, with the calm eyes of someone who had buried more people than she had fed. She had been a field medic in the Phoenix Consortium’s border skirmishes before she found El Dorado, before she became the closest thing the settlement had to a leader. She knew how to make decisions that killed people. She had made peace with it.

“The Church is moving supplies through the eastern corridor,” she said. “Synapto-Regulin. Nerve sheathing compounds. The stuff that keeps people like you from shaking apart.”

Kit’s hands were still. He placed them flat on his knees.

“I know what it is.”

“There’s a shipment due at the Order of Elena’s forward clinic in three days. It’s lightly guarded—they’re relying on stealth, not force. They don’t think anyone knows about the route.” She paused. “We have a contact inside the distribution chain. He can redirect a crate. Make it look like it was lost.”

“You want me to steal from the Church.”

“I want you to consider something.” Marisol leaned forward, her voice dropping. “You’re stable. You’re one of maybe three Returned Donors in El Dorado who can hold a conversation without their mind drifting. That’s rare. That’s valuable. And we need people who can move through the world without breaking.”

“You’re recruiting me.”

“I’m offering you a choice.”

Kit looked at the map on the wall. The lines were hand-drawn, the territories marked in different colors—Church red, Consortium blue,

the gray no-man's-land where El Dorado sat like a splinter beneath the skin of the desert. He had never left this place since he arrived, carried by a trader who found him wandering the salt flats with no memory of how he got there. He had built a garden. He had grown things. He had learned to sleep through the night without dreaming of Voss's face.

"The shipment will pass within a day's walk of the outer perimeter," Marisol said. "You'll have a map. A window. The decision is yours. But if you take what's offered, you'll have medicine. Enough to keep the tremors at bay for months. Enough to stay useful."

She did not say *enough to stay alive*. She did not have to.

Kit stood. The chair wobbled. He did not fix it.

"I'll think about it."

The map appeared in his quarters that evening, slipped under the door while he was in the garden. He unfolded it on his cot and traced the route with his finger: a winding path through the ruins of an old highway, past the collapsed skeleton of a gas station, into the dry riverbed where the Church's couriers would pass. The contact's mark was a small X, barely visible, where the crate would be left.

He folded the map and put it in his pocket.

The next morning, he went to the garden and worked. He thinned the lettuce. He adjusted the pH. He talked to the basil, because talking to the basil was easier than talking to himself. His hands were steady. They had been steady for six years, except for the mornings when they weren't, and those mornings were getting closer together.

Three days later, he walked out of El Dorado's perimeter just before dusk, following the map.

The weight of the stolen crate pressed into his palms as he carried it through the dusk-lit corridor of El Dorado's outer ring. The

medicine vials inside clinked with each step, a quiet music that promised relief from the tremors that had begun waking him before dawn, shaking his hands until he could barely hold a trowel. His chest ached with something that wasn't quite pain—not yet—but would be soon, if the progression followed the pattern the Order of Elena's physicians had described before he fled north.

He stopped where the corridor opened onto the garden.

Lettuce grew in neat rows under the UV panels, their leaves crisp and green, untouched by the desert outside. He had planted them. He had mixed the nutrient solution, adjusted the pH, pruned the bolters, talked to them in the quiet hours when the rest of El Dorado slept. They did not know they were alive because of him. They did not ask for anything.

The crate felt heavier now.

Kit set it down on the workbench beside the seedling trays. His hands, still steady enough, opened the lid. Twenty-four vials of Synapto-Regulin, each one stamped with the Church's seal of manufacture. Enough to keep his nerve sheaths from degrading for six months, maybe eight if he rationed. Enough to keep walking, keep working, keep being useful instead of becoming another broken mouth to feed, another soul the Order of Elena would have to coax back from the void.

Behind him, footsteps. Soft. Deliberate.

He did not turn.

"You found the cache," Marisol said. Her voice carried no surprise. Of course it didn't. She had known exactly where he would go, exactly what he would find. The leak had been curated for him like a tailored coat.

"I found it," Kit agreed.

He reached into the crate and picked up one vial, holding it to the light. The liquid inside was clear, almost invisible. He had been a donor for eleven years. He had lent his pattern recognition, his

spatial reasoning, his ability to remember faces to a woman named Voss who had used him to run a shipping empire from the Oregon coast. When she died—shot in a border dispute that amounted to a disagreement over who owned a stretch of radioactive road—his mind had come back in pieces. The Order of Elena had told him he was one of the lucky ones. That less than one percent regained function.

They had not told him about the tremors.

“We need someone with your stability,” Marisol said, stepping closer. She was a small woman, gray-haired, with the calm eyes of someone who had buried more people than she had fed. “The Church is moving. The Phoenix Consortium is moving. Everyone is moving. El Dorado can’t stay hidden forever, and when they find us, we’ll need more than lettuce.”

Kit set the vial back in the crate.

“You’re testing me,” he said.

A pause.

“Yes.”

He turned to face her. The garden hummed behind him, pumps cycling, lights humming, life persisting in the hollowed-out ruin of a casino basement where the slot machines had been ripped out and replaced with grow beds. He had helped build those beds. He had bled into the soil mix when a pipe burst and gashed his arm, and he had watched the beets grow anyway, fed by his blood, asking nothing in return.

“The Church used the same logic,” he said. “The greater good. The noble sacrifice. They told me I would be remembered. That my donation would lift humanity. That it was the only path forward.” He looked at his hands. The tremors had started. “I was twenty-two. I believed them because I was poor, and they offered my family medicine.”

Marisol’s expression did not change.

“That was different.”

“Was it?”

The word hung between them, sharp and honest. Kit felt the shape of it in his chest, cold and familiar. He had spent five years in El Dorado learning to be whole again. Learning to want things that were his own. Learning that a garden did not need a reason to exist beyond its own green hunger. And now they were asking him to become something else. A weapon. A tool. A mind that could be pointed at the world and told to break it.

“If I take this medicine,” he said, “I’m taking it from someone else. There are twenty-four vials here. The shipment was supposed to go to the Order of Elena’s clinic in the eastern settlements. That’s twenty-four people who won’t get treatment because I decided my hands were more important than theirs.”

“Those people are already dead,” Marisol said quietly. “The Church doesn’t distribute fairly. The wealthy get the medicine. The poor get sermons.”

“I used to be the poor getting sermons.”

She fell silent.

Kit crouched down and closed the crate. His fingers lingered on the latch, feeling the warmth of the plastic where it had absorbed the garden’s heat. He thought about the tremors. He thought about the morning, two weeks ago, when he had dropped a seedling tray and watched thirty basil sprouts scatter across the concrete floor, their root balls breaking, their stems snapping, because his hands had betrayed him.

He thought about how he had knelt and tried to replant them anyway, pressing the broken stems into fresh soil, watering them, talking to them. Three had survived.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

Marisol’s breath caught. Not loud. Almost imperceptible. But he heard it.

“I’ll be your operative,” he continued, still looking at the crate. “I’ll run your supply lines. I’ll assess threats. I’ll use the fragments of Voss’s mind that still rattle around in my skull, the patterns she learned, the routes she knew. I’ll do it because if I don’t, someone else will, and they might be worse at it, or more eager, or less careful.”

He stood. Met her eyes.

“But don’t tell me it’s noble. Don’t tell me it’s sacrifice for the greater good. I know what that language costs. I paid for it with my mind. I’ll do this because it’s necessary, and because I’m the one who can, and because that’s the choice this world leaves us. But I won’t pretend it’s clean.”

Marisol held his gaze for a long moment. Then she nodded, once, and turned to leave.

At the doorway, she stopped.

“The vials,” she said. “Keep them.”

Kit looked down at the crate.

“Twenty-four doses,” he said. “There are thirty-seven children in El Dorado. Fourteen of them have nerve degradation from pre-transfer conditioning. If I keep all of this, I’m no better than the Church.”

He reached into the crate, took out six vials—enough to keep him functional, barely—and pushed the rest across the bench toward her.

“Take these to the clinic. Tell them it fell off a truck.”

Marisol’s face did something complicated. He could not read it. He was not sure he wanted to.

She picked up the crate and carried it out.

Kit stood alone in the garden, surrounded by plants that did not know he had just sold a piece of himself to protect them. The lights hummed. The pumps cycled. The basil seedlings he had replanted

from the broken tray reached toward the UV panels with their small, green leaves, and asked for nothing in return.

He sat down on the workbench and watched them grow.

Tomorrow, he would learn the routes. Tomorrow, he would study the Church's supply schedules, the Consortium's patrol patterns, the places where El Dorado's survival intersected with the world's violence. Tomorrow, he would become something other than a gardener.

But tonight, he sat in the green hum of living things and let himself be small. Let himself be still. Let himself be a man who had been offered a choice and had chosen to protect the only peace he had ever found, even if it meant losing it.

The weight of the soil was not in the dirt itself.

It was in what you had to bury to keep the seeds alive.

The Iron Scavengers of Great Salt

> *On the edge of the stagnant Great Salt Lake, a family of salvagers finds a cache of 'Dumb-Logic'—mechanical calculators that don't use circuits—and must hide them from a roving inquisitor.*

The Iron Scavengers of Great Salt

The salt flats stretched out like a wound that would never heal. White and cracked, they shimmered under a bleached sky, the horizon dissolved into haze so complete that Jace sometimes forgot where the ground ended and the air began. He'd been working these flats for twenty-three years, long enough to know that the salt would take everything eventually—metal, memory, meaning. It was patient like that.

"Tracks here, Dad. They head east and then curl back." Elara crouched thirty yards ahead, one hand shielding her eyes against the glare. At sixteen she had her mother's sharpness, the way she could read a landscape like a document. Jace had learned to trust her eyes more than his own.

He trudged toward her, the salvage rig's engine ticking as it cooled behind them. The thing was a patchwork of salvaged plates and welded prayers—a rust-bucket held together by habit and hope. But it ran. Most days, that was enough.

"Backhoe," he said, kneeling beside her. The tire impressions were faint, nearly swallowed by the salt's constant creep. "Heavy load. Full scoop, by the depth."

“Or empty and just bogged down,” Elara countered. “Look how the left side digs deeper. Driver was compensating for an imbalance.”

Jace smiled despite himself. “You see that?”

“I see everything.” She stood, brushing white dust from her knees. “It’s headed toward the old cargo haulers. The ones we passed last season, remember? Where the salt took the cab first.”

He remembered. A convoy of pre-collapse trucks, probably abandoned during the resource wars when the roads became killing fields. He’d dismissed them as picked clean—every scavenger for a hundred miles had passed them by. But Elara’s tracker’s eye saw what his complacency missed.

“Let’s go take a look.”

The hauler was worse than he remembered. Its chassis had sunk into the salt like a drowned thing, the cab’s roof collapsed inward, windows long since shattered and filled with crystalline residue. Rust had eaten the undercarriage to lacework. The bed was empty, the tires nothing but shredded rubber ghosts embedded in the white earth. But the backhoe tracks led here, and then stopped.

“Something’s not right.” Jace circled the wreck, running his gloved hand along its flank. The metal flaked away at his touch, leaving orange smears on his fingers. “Nobody would waste fuel dragging a rig out here for this heap.”

“Unless they knew something we don’t.” Elara had climbed into the cab, her voice muffled by rust and distance. “Dad, come see.”

He found her in the driver’s compartment, crouched on a seat that had long since surrendered to decay. She was tracing a seam along the back wall, a seam that shouldn’t exist. The metal there was cleaner, newer than the rest, as if someone had cut and re-welded the panel within the last few years.

“Secret compartment,” she whispered, the joy in her voice like a struck match.

They worked together, prying the panel loose with crowbars, the

metal screaming in protest. When it finally gave way, the air that escaped was dry and old, tasting of nothing at all.

Inside, nestled in a cradle of rotted foam, sat five brass cylinders.

Jace lifted one out with both hands, careful as a father holding a newborn. It was heavy, dense, its surface engraved with concentric circles and tiny numerals. Knurled knobs protruded from its top and sides, and a crank folded flush against its body. He knew what it was—every scavenger knew the stories. Pre-collapse calculation devices, mechanical minds that could work numbers without circuits, without forbidden computing. They called them Dumb-Logic, though there was nothing dumb about them.

“My god,” Elara breathed. “They’re beautiful.”

“They’re heresy.” The words came out flat, heavy, dead. Jace set the device back in its cradle. “The Order would burn us for these. Burn us and salt the ground where we stood.”

“But they’re not computers.” Elara was already reaching for another one, her fingers tracing its brass flank with reverence. “They’re mechanical. There’s no electricity. No circuits. They’re just—”

“Gears,” Jace finished. “And levers. And the ability to calculate a course through the salt storms without a single forbidden thought.” He met her eyes. “That’s exactly why they’re dangerous. Vark and his Inquisitors don’t care about electricity. They care about knowledge that doesn’t come from the Church.”

Elara’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t argue. She’d grown up in the shadow of the Order’s teachings, knew the price of defiance as well as he did.

They loaded the devices into a canvas sack, wrapped in oilcloth to protect them from the salt’s insistent corrosion. Jace’s mind was already racing—planning hiding spots, contingency stories, alibis. The rig would need to be searched. He’d have to clean every trace of their work here, wait for the wind to erase their tracks.

By the time they reached the main salvage trail, the sun was

beginning its slow bleed into the western horizon. The salt flats turned amber and rose, beautiful in a way that always felt like a lie.

Neither of them saw Marta watching from the ridge a quarter mile east.

Marta had been working the flats for six years, ever since her husband died in a collapse at the old rail yard. She ran a single-mule rig, barely kept it running, and watched younger, luckier scavengers like Jace pull fortunes from the salt while she scraped by on bolts and salvage-grade pig iron. She'd seen Jace and his daughter turn east instead of north this morning, seen them circle back toward the old cargo haulers she'd dismissed years ago.

She'd followed, keeping low, keeping quiet.

When she saw them load the brass cylinders into their rig, she knew. She didn't know what the devices were, exactly, but she knew they were valuable. Knew that Jace's caution, his careful piety, was a mask. The way he'd glanced over his shoulder, the way Elara had clutched the sack like a child, the way they'd cleaned the site with almost frantic efficiency.

By the time the sun had fully set, Marta was already walking toward the Inquisitor's station, her jealousy burning bright and bitter in her chest.

She told herself it was duty. She told herself the Church needed to know about heretics in their midst.

But as she walked, she was already calculating what the reward might buy her.

The salt flats didn't care. They just waited, patient and hungry, for everything to return to them.

The sun hammered the salt flats white, and Jace saw the dust plume long before he heard the engine. The Order's transport moved fast, a dark bead threading through the haze, growing with each breath until it resolved into the distinctive angular shape of an Inquisitorial

vehicle. Jace's throat tightened.

"Elara," he said, his voice carrying no more urgency than a comment on the weather. "Inside the cabin. Now. Don't come out unless I call you."

She looked up from the pan she was scrubbing, saw the vehicle, and understood. She didn't argue. She didn't ask questions. She simply dried her hands, walked to the cabin, and closed the door behind her. The latch clicked.

Jace straightened his shoulders and waited.

The transport pulled up fifty yards from the salvage rig, its engine cutting with a cough that echoed across the flats. The door opened, and Inquisitor Vark stepped out.

He was not a large man, but he carried himself as if he were. His robes were the deep gray of ash, cinched at the waist with a belt of iron links. A pendant hung at his throat—the cog-and-flame insignia of the Order of Konrad, polished to a mirror shine. His face was lean, clean-shaven, his eyes the pale blue of a winter sky. They found Jace and held him with the patient attention of a predator who has already scented blood.

"Scavenger Jace." Vark's voice was flat, unhurried. He walked toward the camp with a measured stride, his boots crunching on the salt. "I trust the day finds you well."

"Inquisitor." Jace inclined his head, keeping his hands visible at his sides. "It's an honor. We don't often get visitors from the Order out here."

"No." Vark stopped a few feet away, his gaze sweeping the camp—the fire pit, the drying racks, the salvaged plates stacked beside the rig. "I imagine you don't. That's what makes an unannounced visit so useful. One gets to see things as they truly are, rather than as they've been arranged for inspection."

Jace allowed a slow, weary smile. "Inquisitor, if I had time to arrange things for inspection, I'd be a richer man. Out here, we're

lucky if we remember to eat before the sun goes down."

Vark's lips twitched—not quite a smile, but an acknowledgment. "And yet, I hear you've had a profitable day. A cache of valuables, recovered from one of the old cargo haulers."

The words landed like a stone in still water. Jace felt the ripple pass through him, but he held his face steady. *Marta.* It had to be Marta. There was no one else with the spite and the proximity.

"Profitable is a strong word," Jace said, rubbing the back of his neck. "We found some old trinkets. Brasswork. Pre-collapse decorative pieces. Nothing functional."

"I'd like to see them."

The request came without threat, without heat. That was what made it dangerous. Vark wasn't trying to intimidate; he was simply stating what would happen next. Jace nodded, turned, and walked toward the rig's storage locker. He could feel Vark's eyes on his back, tracking every movement.

The locker opened with a groan. Inside, wrapped in the same oilcloth they'd used on the flats, the five calculators lay nestled among spare parts and scrap. Jace pulled out the bundle, feeling the weight of it, the impossible risk.

He carried it to the workbench and unwrapped the cloth with deliberate care.

The brass caught the sun like a living thing. Five cylinders, each engraved with intricate patterns, their knurled knobs gleaming. They sat on the weathered wood like artifacts from another world—which, in a sense, they were.

Vark stepped closer. His hand hovered over the devices, not quite touching. His eyes moved across their surfaces, reading the engravings, the numerals, the meticulous craftsmanship.

"These are not decorative trinkets," he said.

"They are," Jace said quickly. "They're totems, Inquisitor.

Handcrafted, yes, but not functional. I found them in a cargo hauler that must have been abandoned during the resource wars. They were packed in foam, wrapped in oiled leather. Someone meant to preserve them."

"For what purpose?"

"Beauty." Jace let the word hang in the air. "To celebrate the complexity of the human spirit, the elegance of the mind God gave us. No circuits. No electricity. Just brass and gears and the work of human hands. I thought they might make good offering pieces for the Church. A reminder of what we are, when we don't rely on forbidden tools."

Vark looked at him. The pale eyes held no judgment, but they also held no mercy. "Show me how they work."

Jace's heart stopped. Just for a beat, just long enough for the blood to turn cold in his veins. Then it started again, and he picked up the most ornate of the five—the one with the most intricate engravings, the one Elara had held with such reverence.

"They don't work," he said. "Not in any meaningful sense. The gears are frozen, seized by corrosion. But I can show you the craftsmanship, if you'd like. The precision of the machining."

He turned the device in his hands, his fingers finding the crank. It moved stiffly, grinding, the sound dry and wrong. He turned it again, and a faint clicking emerged from the cylinder's interior. Vark watched, his face unreadable.

"It produces numbers," Vark said. Not a question.

"It produces *noise*," Jace countered. "The numbers are random. The mechanism is broken. It's an ornament, Inquisitor. Nothing more."

Vark was silent for a long moment. The wind picked up, carrying a fine mist of salt across the camp, coating everything in a thin white film. The cabin door remained closed. Jace could feel Elara's silence like a held breath.

"An ornament," Vark repeated. "And yet, when I arrived, you were

not displaying them. They were hidden in a locker, wrapped in oilcloth, buried beneath scrap."

"I was going to bring them to the Church myself," Jace said. "I wanted to present them properly. To the right people. Not just leave them out to be covered in salt and dust."

Vark reached into his robe and withdrew a small, cloth-wrapped object. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing a hand-held cross—brass, inlaid with a single shard of obsidian. He pressed the cross to his lips, then held it before him.

"The Order of Konrad exists to protect humanity from itself," Vark said. "We guard against the sins of the past, the circuits and the algorithms that seduced our ancestors into surrender. Every device that computes without human intention is a step toward that abyss. You know this."

"I do."

"And yet, you kept these."

"I kept them as gifts. As art. As proof that human hands can create beauty without sin."

Vark studied him. The pale eyes moved from Jace's face to the devices on the bench, then back. "I need more than your word, Scavenger. I need a demonstration."

Jace's mouth went dry. "What kind of demonstration?"

Vark gestured toward the smelting furnace, its chimney cold but its firebox ready. "Destroy one. In front of me. If these are merely ornaments, as you claim, then sacrificing one to prove your faith should mean nothing."

The words hung between them like a blade.

Jace looked at the calculator in his hands. The most ornate one. The one with the most potential. The one that could plot courses through storms, calculate tonnages for salvage, teach Elara the lost language of numbers.

He looked at Vark.

He walked to the furnace.

The firebox door opened with a screech of rust. Inside, the ashes of a dozen previous fires lay cold and gray. Jace set the device on the lip of the opening, then reached for his fuel can. He poured oil over the brass, letting it pool, letting it soak. The sweet smell of it rose in the dry air.

He didn't look at the cabin. He didn't look at Vark.

He struck a match.

The flame touched the oil and the world turned orange.

Jace dropped the calculator into the firebox and watched it burn. The brass blackened, then blistered, then began to soften. The knurled knobs warped and sagged. The engravings filled with soot. The device that could calculate orbits and trajectories and the precise angle to steer through a whiteout storm melted into a puddle of molten metal, pooling at the bottom of the furnace like a discarded thought.

He let it burn until the brass was liquid. Until nothing recognizable remained.

Then he closed the firebox door and turned back to Vark.

The Inquisitor's face had not changed. If anything, it had softened, just slightly, as if a knot of suspicion had been loosened. He tucked the cross back into his robe.

"You are either a faithful man," Vark said, "or the most convincing heretic I have ever met."

"I'm just a scavenger," Jace said. "Trying to survive."

Vark nodded slowly. He walked to the workbench and picked up one of the remaining four calculators. He turned it over in his hands, testing its weight, reading its engravings. Then he set it down.

“Keep your totems,” he said. “Display them openly, as you promised. If I hear word that you have used them for anything other than ornament, I will return. And next time, I will not ask for a demonstration.”

He turned and walked back to his transport without another word. The engine coughed to life. The vehicle circled once, then headed back across the flats, its dust plume dissolving into the haze.

Jace stood at the furnace, his hands trembling, the heat of the brass pool still radiating against his legs.

The cabin door opened. Elara stepped out, her face pale, her eyes fixed on the furnace. She didn’t say anything. She just walked to the workbench, picked up one of the remaining calculators, and held it against her chest like a wounded bird.

Jace watched the dust plume disappear into the white horizon.

“Help me hide them,” he said. “Under the false floor. Where the salt can’t reach.”

She nodded. They worked in silence, lifting the rig’s floor panel, wrapping each calculator in oilcloth and burying it in the hollow space between the chassis and the cabin. When the last one was hidden, Jace replaced the panel and scattered salt over the seams, erasing the evidence of their work.

By the time the sun began to set, the camp looked as it had before Vark arrived. Ordinary. Forgettable. Pious.

But the furnace still held the memory of fire, and the air still smelled of melted brass.

Elara sat at the workbench, her back to her father, staring at the empty space where the most beautiful of the calculators had rested. Her shoulders were rigid, her hands clenched in her lap.

“It was worth it,” Jace said, but the words sounded hollow even to him.

She didn’t answer.

The cabin was silent for a long time after Vark's transport disappeared. Jace stood by the furnace, watching the last ribbons of heat shimmer above the firebox, the scent of scorched brass still thick in his throat. Behind him, he could hear Elara moving—sharp, jerky movements, the slide of metal against metal as she rearranged tools that didn't need rearranging.

"Elara."

She didn't stop. She wrenched a rusted gear from the workbench and slammed it into a bin, the clang ringing across the flats.

"Elara, talk to me."

"Talk to you?" She spun around, and her face was a storm. "What is there to talk about, Dad? You melted it. You melted the best one. The one that could—do you even know what it could do?"

"I know exactly what it could do." Jace's voice was quiet, steady. "That's why I burned it."

She stared at him, disbelief bright in her eyes. "That makes no sense."

"It makes every kind of sense." He walked toward her, slow, deliberate, the way he approached a spooked animal. "That device could calculate a course through a whiteout with less than half a degree of error. It could tell you how much weight a beam will hold before you trust your life to it. It could do things that the Church has declared forbidden, because those things belong to them. To the Enhanced. To the people who decide what knowledge is safe for the rest of us."

"Then why didn't we hide them better? Why didn't we deny everything?"

"Because Marta saw us." He stopped a few feet from her. "Vark didn't guess. He was told. If I had denied it, he would have torn our camp apart. He would have found them all. And then he would have taken you for questioning. Do you understand that, Elara? He

would have taken *you*."

Her jaw tightened. She looked away, at the furnace, at the cooling puddle of brass inside. Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. "But you didn't have to choose the most beautiful one."

"I chose the one that looked the most valuable." Jace reached out, hesitant, and placed a hand on her shoulder. She didn't shake it off. "I chose the one that would hurt the most to lose. Because that's what Vark needed to see. He needed to see me sacrifice something real. Something precious. If I had thrown a lesser piece into the fire, he would have known I was faking."

Elara's eyes glistened, but she didn't cry. She was too much like him for that. "It was perfect."

"I know."

"We could have used it to navigate. To avoid the patrols. To find a way out of this place."

"I know." Jace pulled her into a rough embrace, and she let him. "But we still have four. And we have something more important than a perfect machine."

She pulled back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No." He smiled, tired and worn. "It's just the truth."

The storm came three hours after nightfall.

It started as a change in the wind—a shift from the dry, steady breeze that scoured the flats to something heavier, wetter, carrying the taste of distant brine. Jace felt it on his skin before he saw the first signs, a prickle of instinct honed by decades on the salt.

"Elara." He was already moving. "Get inside. Now."

She didn't argue. She knew the storms. They swept in from the lake without warning, curtains of white so dense that a man could lose

his own hand in front of his face. The salt whipped through the air like ground glass, scouring everything it touched, burying landmarks under inches of fresh deposit.

By the time she reached the cabin, the first flurries were already visible—not snow, but crystalline salt lifted from the flats, caught in the wind's teeth. The sky turned from black to a pale, milky grey.

Jace followed her in and pulled the door shut, sealing the latch. The cabin's walls were thick, insulated with packed salt and scrap, but the storm found every crack. It whistled through gaps he'd thought sealed, sighed through joints he'd forgotten existed.

Outside, the world dissolved.

"We're going to be trapped here for days," Elara said, her voice flat. "Maybe a week, if the deposits are deep."

Jace didn't answer. He was already on his knees, prying up the false floor panel. The four remaining calculators lay in their oilcloth cocoon, safe and dry. He pulled one out, unwrapped it with careful hands, and held it up to the lantern light.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"We're not staying." He turned the device over, finding the knurled knobs, the tiny numerals engraved into its face. "I charted the course earlier, when I saw the pressure drop. The bearing is two-ninety, with a drift correction of four degrees every mile. But I need the exact calculations for the passes through the ridge. Without that, we'll wander blind."

Elara stared at him. "We've never navigated a storm before. We've always just waited them out."

"We've never had a reason to risk it before." He met her eyes. "But Marta's not done with us. She'll come back, or she'll send others. And Vark might have left, but he'll have people watching. The Order never truly forgets." He held out the calculator. "This is our way out. But I need you to help me work it."

She took the device from his hands, her fingers finding its surfaces

with a reverence he recognized. He watched her study it, watched her trace the engravings, watched her mind begin to map the patterns.

“The crank advances the register,” she said slowly. “These dials show the input. The top row is the result.”

“Can you read them?”

She turned the crank. The calculator clicked, gears engaging with a sound like a pocket watch’s heartbeat. The dials spun, then settled. She studied the numbers, her lips moving soundlessly.

“The bearing to the ridge is two-ninety-three,” she said. “But we have to correct for the salt drift. The wind’s coming from the north-northwest at—” she paused, calculating in her head, “—maybe eighteen knots. That’ll push us south by three degrees if we don’t adjust.”

Jace smiled. It was a small thing, barely more than a tightening of his eyes, but it was real. “Can you plot the course?”

She looked up at him, and the anger was still there—burning beneath the surface, raw and fresh. But something else flickered alongside it. Pride, maybe. Purpose.

“Give me ten minutes,” she said.

They left the cabin an hour later, wrapped in every layer they owned, goggles strapped tight against the salt’s razor edge. The rig’s engine coughed, sputtered, and caught, its headlights cutting a brief, weak beam into the white chaos.

Jace drove. Elara sat beside him, the calculator in her lap, her fingers moving across its dials with growing confidence. She called out corrections—two degrees left, then one right, slow down at the half-mile mark, there’s an old ravine somewhere ahead.

The storm swallowed the world. There was no sky, no ground, no horizon. Just the white, pressing in from all sides, hungry and absolute.

But Jace had a course.

He followed her voice through the blindness, trusting the brass and the gears and the sixteen-year-old girl who had taught herself to read them in the span of a single night. The rig lurched and groaned, its tires fighting for purchase on the shifting salt, but it kept moving.

Behind them, the cabin disappeared. Ahead, the ridge waited.

The storm screamed, and the salt beat against the windshield like a thousand tiny hammers, but Jace held the wheel steady. Elara's voice cut through the roar, a thread of certainty in the formless white.

"Drift correction—two degrees starboard. We're coming up on the pass."

The rig shuddered as the ground changed beneath them, salt flats giving way to the rocky spine of the ridgeline. For one terrible moment, the wheels spun without purchase, and Jace felt the whole machine begin to slide sideways. He feathered the throttle, fighting the instinct to accelerate, and the tires bit again.

Then the storm thinned, just slightly, and the ridge walls rose on either side of them—dark shapes in the whiteness, solid and real.

They were through.

Jace let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Beside him, Elara set the calculator down in her lap, her fingers still curled around its brass body. She was trembling, he realized. From cold, from fear, from the sheer impossible weight of what they'd just done.

He reached over and covered her hand with his own.

"You did it," he said.

She looked at him, and in the dim glow of the dashboard lights, he saw something in her face that hadn't been there before. Not just relief. Not just exhaustion.

Certainty.

“We still have three more,” she said. “Hidden under the floor.”

“I know.”

“And Marta’s still out there. And Vark. They’ll keep watching.”

“I know that too.”

She was quiet for a moment, staring out at the ridge walls that enclosed them, the salt that still swirled in the air but no longer blinded. “It was still wrong. Burning the best one.”

Jace didn’t answer right away. He thought about the pool of brass in the bottom of the furnace, cooling now, buried under fresh salt. He thought about Vark’s pale eyes, measuring him, weighing his soul. He thought about the Church’s teachings—that some sacrifices were noble, that some losses were sacred.

He thought about how little the Church knew about real sacrifice.

“Yes,” he said finally. “It was wrong. And it was necessary. And those two things are going to live inside you for the rest of your life, Elara, because that’s what it costs to survive in a world that’s afraid of what you know.”

She looked down at the calculator in her lap. The brass gleamed softly in the darkness, its engravings catching the faint dashboard light. A tool. A heresy. A secret.

“Then we’d better make sure it was worth it,” she said.

The rig rolled on through the pass, and behind them the storm continued to rage across the salt flats—patient, hungry, patient. The three remaining calculators lay hidden beneath the false floor, wrapped in oilcloth, waiting for the day when they would be needed again.

And the furnace back at the abandoned camp kept its secret, a smear of brass at the bottom of the firebox slowly disappearing beneath the salt’s relentless advance.

The family endured. The knowledge endured. And somewhere out in the white chaos, the salt kept taking everything—metal, memory, meaning—until nothing remained but what was worth keeping.

The Last Will of a Ghost

> *A common laborer finds a discarded, hand-written diary of a man who volunteered to be a donor, and realizes the man's family never received the promised compensation.*

The Last Will of a Ghost

The diary appeared on the third day of rain, tucked behind a loose floorboard in Renzo's old room.

Pavel found it while fixing a leak in the wall they had shared for six years. The building's bones were pre-Collapse concrete, stubborn and waterlogged, and the landlord never sent anyone to patch the cracks. Pavel had learned to do it himself, trading a morning's labor for tar and a brush, because the alternative was watching the mold creep up his children's walls.

He hadn't meant to pry. The board came free in his hand, and the bundle wrapped in oilcloth fell out, landing on the damp floor with a soft thump. Pavel almost put it back. Renzo had been a quiet man, the kind who kept his eyes down and his mouth shut, and whatever he had hidden beneath his floor was his own business.

But Renzo was dead now. Had been for three weeks.

Pavel unwrapped the oilcloth and found a notebook, cheap paper bound in cardboard, the kind sold at the dockside market for a few coppers. The handwriting inside was cramped and careful, as if each letter cost something to put down. He read the first page standing up, rain dripping through the hole in the roof, his tar brush forgotten in his hand.

My name is Renzo Marchetti. I am forty-two years old. I have agreed to

become a donor for Executive Marcus Webb of the Phoenix Consortium Shipping Division. In exchange for my service, my wife, Elena Marchetti, will receive the sum of two thousand standard credits, paid in monthly installments of fifty credits over forty months, beginning thirty days after my donation is complete.

The words sat there, simple and clear, the promise of a man who had signed his life away.

Pavel turned the page. There were more entries—dates, names, a copy of the contract Renzo had signed with the Consortium's seal pressed into the margin. The handwriting grew shakier toward the end, the letters looser, as if Renzo had been writing in a hurry or in fear. The final entry was dated two days before his death.

They tell me the procedure is tomorrow. I am afraid. But Elena will be taken care of. That is what matters.

Pavel closed the diary.

He had seen Renzo's widow three times since the funeral. Once at the market, once standing outside her door, and once through the window where she sat alone at a bare table, staring at nothing. She was thinner than she had been a month ago. The landlord had already come by twice, demanding rent.

The promised payments had never arrived.

Pavel set down the diary and picked up his tar brush. He finished patching the hole in the wall, one-handed, the notebook tucked under his arm like a thing that might bite.

The Consortium administration building stood at the edge of the docks, a fortress of gray stone and iron bars, its windows set high and narrow like a prison's. Pavel had walked past it a thousand times but never entered. The building had no door for men like him—only a service entrance around back, where laborers came to collect their chits and dockmasters came to settle accounts.

He went through the service entrance anyway, diary in hand.

The clerk behind the counter was young, maybe thirty, with the soft hands and clean collar of a man who had never lifted a crate in his life. He looked at Pavel the way men look at wet dogs that have wandered into a dry room.

"State your business."

Pavel placed the diary on the counter. "I need to file a claim. A donor contract that wasn't honored."

The clerk's expression shifted—not surprise, not concern, but a practiced blankness that Pavel recognized from years of dealing with dock overseers. It was the face of a man who had been trained to say no before he heard the question.

"Claims go through the Compensation Office. Third floor. You'll need to fill out Form 7-B and provide identification."

"I have the contract. Right here."

The clerk's eyes flicked to the diary, then back to Pavel. "That's not a contract. That's a notebook."

"It's a copy. Handwritten. But it's signed. Sealed."

"Do you have the original?"

"No."

"Then you don't have a contract."

The clerk started to turn away. Pavel felt something hot rise in his chest—not anger, not yet, but the kind of desperate clarity that comes when you realize the walls are closing in and nobody cares.

"The payments never reached her," Pavel said. "Renzo Marchetti. He donated for an executive named Webb. Marcus Webb. The contract says fifty credits a month for forty months. She hasn't seen a single one."

The clerk stopped. He turned back, slowly, and this time his face was different. Not blank anymore. It was the face of a man who had

just heard something that was not meant to be said aloud.

"I don't know that name," the clerk said.

But his voice had changed. The bored dismissiveness was gone, replaced by something tighter, something that sat in the back of his throat like a stone.

"You don't need to know him," Pavel said. "You just need to look up the contract. Check the books. See if the payments were made."

The clerk leaned forward, both hands flat on the counter. His voice dropped to a murmur that barely carried past Pavel's ears.

"Listen to me, dockworker. I don't know what you found, and I don't want to know. But if you think a man like you can walk into this building and demand answers about a donor contract involving an executive of this Consortium, you are either very stupid or very desperate. And I don't care which."

"Then tell me where to go."

"Go home. Throw that notebook in the bay. Forget you ever saw it."

"And if I don't?"

The clerk smiled. It was not a kind smile.

"Then I'll have to call Security. And they'll want to know where you got that diary. They'll want to know why you were in a dead man's room. They'll want to know a lot of things that you don't want to answer."

Pavel stared at him. The diary sat between them, cheap cardboard and wet ink, holding the last words of a man who had believed the system would keep its promises.

He picked it up.

"Thank you for your time," he said.

The clerk's smile never wavered. "Don't come back."

Pavel walked out of the administration building into the gray afternoon rain. The diary was tucked under his arm, its pages pressing against his ribs like a second heartbeat. He stood in the wet street for a long time, watching the Consortium flags flap in the harbor wind, thinking about Renzo's widow sitting alone at her bare table.

The system was not broken, he realized.

It was working exactly as designed.

He had just never understood the design before.

The rain stopped by the time Pavel reached his door, but the gray clung to the air like a wet sheet. He stood in the narrow hallway, diary still tucked under his arm, and listened to the sounds of his apartment: his wife humming in the kitchen, the scrape of a chair, the low murmur of his children arguing over something small. Normal sounds. The sounds of a life that was still whole.

He did not go inside.

Instead he sat on the bottom step of the stairwell, where the plaster had crumbled away to reveal rusted rebar, and he opened the diary again. He read the contract terms slowly, mouthing the words like a prayer he barely believed in. Two thousand credits. Fifty a month for forty months. A promise written in a dead man's hand.

Pavel thought of his own savings. A tin box buried in the crawlspace beneath the stairs, wrapped in oilcloth just like the diary. Fifty credits, accumulated over years of overtime shifts and skipped meals, meant for his daughter's apprenticeship fees. Not enough to cover the full debt. Not even close. But enough to make the first payment. Enough to start.

He thought of the clerk's smile. The threat in his voice. The way the system had closed like a fist around Renzo's promise.

Pavel was not a brave man. He knew this about himself the way he knew the weight of a cargo crate or the smell of the harbor at low

tide. He had never fought a war, never stood up to an overseer, never risked anything larger than a day's wages. But he had shared a wall with Renzo for six years. He had borrowed salt and returned bread. He had watched the man leave for his donation appointment with a gray face and a forced smile, and he had not asked what happened because asking would have made it real.

This was the only thing he could still do.

He went inside, kissed his wife on the cheek, and told her he had to run an errand. She gave him a look—the look of a woman who had been married to a dockworker long enough to recognize when something was wrong—but she did not stop him. She only said, "Dinner's at seven," and turned back to the stove.

The credit exchange was a narrow storefront wedged between a chandler's shop and a tavern, its window grimy with salt and neglect. A bell jangled overhead as Pavel pushed through the door. The clerk inside was old, older than anyone Pavel had ever seen, with fingers bent like bird claws and eyes the color of dishwater.

"I need to send money," Pavel said. "Anonymous."

The old clerk blinked slowly. "Amount?"

"Fifty credits."

"To whom?"

Pavel gave him the name. Elena Marchetti. A box number at the postal exchange near the docks. He had seen it written on the envelope Renzo had taped to his door the week before he died, a note that said *if anything happens, send here*.

The clerk took the credits—the whole tin box, every coin Pavel had scraped together for his daughter's future—and counted them with those twisted fingers. He wrote out a receipt on a slip of cheap paper, then stamped it with the exchange's mark.

"Name on the transfer?"

"No name."

The clerk's eyes flickered with something that might have been understanding, but he only grunted and made a note in his ledger. "It'll be delivered tomorrow morning. Standard courier."

Pavel took the receipt and folded it into his pocket. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching the harbor through the grimy window, the Consortium flags snapping in the wind. Then he walked home.

He did not tell his wife about the money. He did not tell anyone. That night, after the children were asleep and the apartment had fallen quiet, he took the diary into the crawlspace beneath the stairs. He wrapped it in fresh oilcloth, the same kind he had used for the roof patch, and he tucked it into a corner where the foundation met the earth, deep enough that no one would find it by accident.

He lay awake for a long time that night, listening to the rain start again, thinking about Renzo's handwriting growing loose and shaky, thinking about the widow's empty table. He had not saved her. He had only delayed the inevitable. The next payment would come due in thirty days, and he had no more savings to give. But tomorrow she would receive fifty credits. And for one day, the promise would hold.

Pavel closed his eyes. In the dark, the diary felt like a secret he would carry for the rest of his life—the weight of a man's last will, pressed into the earth beneath his home, waiting for someone else to find it and wonder what it meant.

He hoped no one ever would. But if they did, he hoped they would understand what it cost to keep a promise whispered by a ghost.

The Glass Ledger of Maricopa

> *While escorting a stern Order of Konrad Inquisitor across the salt flats, a frontier hydrologist must defend her automatic irrigation system—a complex network of glass pipes guided by fluidic logic—against charges of heresy.*

The Glass Ledger of Maricopa

The salt hissed under their boots like a thousand tiny warnings.

Sloane had walked these flats a hundred times, knew the way the light bent wrong across the white expanse at midday, turning the horizon into a liquid shimmer that could trick a newcomer into believing there was water ahead when there was only more bone-dry ruin. She kept her eyes low, watching the crust for weak spots where the alkaline brine had eaten through to hollow pockets beneath. One wrong step meant a broken ankle and a slow death under that hammering sun.

The Inquisitor walked behind her, silent, measuring each stride with the careful economy of a man used to rationing everything—movement, speech, judgment. He had shed his black wool traveling robe three miles back, carried it over one arm, but his posture remained rigid despite the sweat darkening his linen shirt. The sigil of the Order of Konrad hung at his throat: a gear with a crack through its center, its teeth broken. She'd seen that symbol before, painted on doors after a raid, pressed into the wax seals of condemnation letters.

She didn't trust him.

She didn't have to like him either. She just had to get him to Maricopa before the pump valves seized from lack of calibration,

and before the next dust storm buried the feed pipes under three feet of silt.

"It's not a machine," she said, for the third time since dawn. "Not in the way you mean."

Vane's boots crunched. He didn't look at her. "Everything that makes a choice is a machine, daughter. The question is whether it makes that choice through grace or through abomination."

"It doesn't make choices. It follows pressure gradients."

"It receives input. It adjusts output. It performs a sequence of actions based on conditions in its environment." He said it flatly, the way a man recites catechism while shaving. "That is decision-making. That is logic. And logic that occurs without a human soul to guide it—"

"Is a rock falling downhill," Sloane cut in. She stopped, turned, faced him. The salt cracked beneath her heel. "Is a river finding the lowest ground. Is a wind shifting because one side of the hill got hotter than the other. You can call that decision-making if you want to twist words into knots. But the water doesn't know it's deciding anything."

Vane studied her with gray eyes the color of pre-storm clouds. He had the kind of face that gave nothing away, all hard lines and hollow cheeks, the face of a man who had spent decades looking for sins in other people's handiwork. She'd heard stories about the Order of Konrad's Inquisitors. They could smell computation, people said. They could walk into a room and feel the ghost of a logic gate like a draft from a cursed window.

"The Church teaches," he said slowly, "that the sin of the pre-Collapse world was not simply the existence of machines. It was the abdication. Humanity built minds of silicon and told them to think, and then told themselves they bore no responsibility for what those minds decided. The sin was automation. The sin was creating systems that could act without human conscience."

"The system doesn't act. It moves water. It opens a channel when

the pressure in the reservoir reaches a certain threshold, and closes it when the pressure drops. That's not conscience. That's physics." She held his gaze. "You can't burn physics as heresy."

Something flickered in his eyes. Not agreement. Not yet. But a crack, maybe. A hairline fracture in the certainty.

He resumed walking. She fell into step beside him.

"Tell me how it works," he said. "From the beginning. Not the justification. Just what it does."

So she did.

She told him about the glass ledger—the network of hand-blown tubes that ran from the Maricopa reservoir down through the terraced fields, each junction a careful arrangement of angled channels and weighted floats. As the reservoir filled, the rising water lifted a series of hollow glass bulbs strung on copper wire. When the bulbs reached a certain height, their weight tripped a lever that redirected flow into the next channel. The system didn't calculate. It responded. The water itself was the logic, moving through the glass like blood through veins, finding its own balance.

"Every junction is calibrated by hand," she said. "We adjust the weights for the season, for the crop type, for how much rain we've had. A child can do it with a set of brass counterweights and a chart. There's no hidden processor. There's no stored sequence. There's just water and glass and gravity."

"And if the reservoir doesn't fill? If the pump fails?"

"Then nothing opens. The crops dry. We lose the harvest." She let the weight of that sit between them. "Same as if a farmer forgets to open a sluice. Same as if a drought comes. The system doesn't override its own failure conditions because it doesn't have conditions. It has limits. Physical limits. Iron and water and pressure."

Vane was quiet for a long stretch. The sun climbed higher, bleaching the world white until Sloane's eyes ached behind her

goggles. She could smell the salt crust baking, could feel the heat radiating up through her boot soles.

"You speak of it like a living thing," he said finally. "Like something with a body and a will."

"I speak of it like a tool. Like a plow. Like a windmill."

"A windmill doesn't decide which way to face."

"It turns into the wind. The wind turns it. Same principle."

He made a sound—not quite a laugh, not quite a scoff. "You have an answer for everything, hydrologist."

"I have an answer for this," she said. "Because if I'm wrong, my people starve. If I'm wrong, you burn our fields and smash our pipes and call it holy work. I need you to understand what you're judging before you judge it."

She hadn't meant to let that much desperation show. The sun had baked her restraint thin.

Vane noticed. Of course he noticed.

They walked another mile in silence, the salt flats stretching endless around them, the mountains of the Maricopa basin still a blue smudge on the horizon. Eventually, he spoke again.

"The Order of Konrad does not burn things without cause, daughter. We do not smash what we do not understand." He paused. "But we do understand. And what we understand, we judge."

Sloane bit down on her reply. She needed him to see the glass ledger. She needed him to put his hands on the valves and watch the water move and understand that there was nothing hidden here, nothing clever in the forbidden sense. Just survival. Just grace, of a mechanical kind.

She needed him to be the kind of man the stories said Inquisitors never were: capable of changing his mind.

The salt crunched beneath their feet. The sun climbed. And ahead, invisible still, Maricopa waited for its judgment.

The settlement of Maricopa rose from the dust like a wound that had learned to heal itself.

Sloane led Vane through the outer palisade—salvaged steel beams driven into the hardpan, lashed with wire—and into the narrow lanes between prefab walls. Children stopped their games to stare. A woman winnowing grain at a communal table set down her sieve and watched the Inquisitor pass with the flat, unreadable look of people who had learned to expect the worst from strangers.

The glass ledger occupied the center of the settlement, where a plaza had been carved from the ruin of an old highway overpass. It rose three meters from a concrete basin, a crystalline tree of interlocking tubes and chambers, each junction sealed with copper fittings and leather gaskets. Sunlight caught the water inside, casting rippling shadows across the ground—blue and silver and green, like a living stained-glass window that breathed.

Vane stopped at the edge of the basin. He did not speak.

Sloane watched him take it in. The main reservoir fed from a hand-pump driven by a windmill on the ridge, its blades turning slow and steady in the afternoon breeze. From the reservoir, water descended through a primary trunk line, then split into six secondary branches that ran to the terraced fields beyond the palisade. At each split, a chamber of blown glass housed a float mechanism: a hollow bulb, weighted with lead shot, rising and falling with the water level. When the float reached a certain height, it lifted a copper lever that redirected flow into the next channel. The whole thing ticked and gurgled, a slow mechanical heartbeat.

"You did this," Vane said. It was not a question.

"I designed it. The glassblowers made the pieces. The whole town helped install it." Sloane stepped up onto the basin's edge, ran her hand along a feeder tube. "It's been running three years now. Never missed a cycle."

Vane approached the nearest junction chamber. He knelt, his knees cracking on the concrete, and peered into the glass. Inside, the float bobbed lazily as water trickled in from above. The copper lever was worn smooth from use, polished to a dull gold by years of friction. He touched the glass with one finger, tracing the path of the water.

"The float rises," he murmured. "When it reaches the top, the lever pivots. The channel closes. The next channel opens."

"Yes."

"And the sequence is determined by the shape of the chamber. The volume of the float. The weight of the shot inside it."

"Yes."

He looked up at her, his gray eyes unreadable. "There is no stored sequence. No memory of what it did yesterday. No anticipation of what it will do tomorrow."

"It doesn't remember. It doesn't plan. It just responds to what's in front of it, right now." She met his gaze. "Like a river. Like gravity."

Vane stood slowly, brushing dust from his knee. He walked the length of the glass ledger, examining each junction, each chamber, each hand-blown curve. Sloane followed a step behind, letting him see for himself. The settlement held its breath. She could feel the weight of forty pairs of eyes on her back, waiting for the verdict.

At the far end, where the last waste channel bled into a drainage sump, Vane stopped. The water here was murky, thick with silt, but the glass was still clear enough to see the final float mechanism—a simple gate that released overflow when the system reached capacity. It was open now, a thin stream of brown water trickling into the sump.

"What happens when it fails?" he asked quietly.

"It has failed. Twice." She pointed to a scar on the pavement where a junction had burst, the glass replaced with a patch of welded steel. "A dust storm clogged the main intake. Pressure built too fast. The glass cracked before the relief valve could open. We lost a day

of watering. Lost about a quarter hectare of beans."

"And you repaired it."

"We replaced the chamber, added a secondary relief valve at the reservoir. It hasn't failed since."

Vane nodded slowly. He turned to face the fields beyond the palisade—rows of maize, squash, beans, their leaves deep green against the pale desert soil. Irrigation channels ran between them, fed by the glass ledger, each one carrying a thin sheet of water that caught the sun like hammered silver. A boy of maybe twelve was walking the far edge of the field, checking the flow with a wooden gauge, adjusting a small valve with a turn of his wrist.

"How many people depend on this?" Vane asked.

"Everyone," Sloane said. "Two hundred and seventeen souls. Directly, for food. Indirectly, for everything else. The surplus we trade buys medicine, tools, cloth. Without the ledger, we couldn't irrigate more than a tenth of this land. We'd be back to hauling water by hand, bucket by bucket, watching half the crops dry up every summer."

Vane was silent for a long moment. The wind stirred his hair, gray-streaked and sweat-darkened. He looked older now than he had on the salt flats. Tired.

"The Church teaches that human suffering is a necessary part of progress," he said, his voice low. "That sacrifice is the engine of advancement. That to avoid suffering through automation is to cheat the soul of its purpose."

Sloane felt a hot retort rise in her throat, but she swallowed it. "I know what the Church teaches. I grew up with it same as you. But I also know what it's like to watch a child die of thirst because the wells ran dry and there weren't enough hands to carry water fast enough." She pointed at the glass ledger. "That's not automation. That's not computation. That's a tool. A tool that lets us survive so we can do the real work—raising children, teaching them, building a community that doesn't have to feed itself to the machine just to

see another season."

Vane turned to face her fully. For the first time since they'd met, his expression softened—not into agreement, but into something that acknowledged the weight of her words.

"Show me the repair," he said. "The junction that burst. Show me how you fixed it."

Sloane led him to the steel patch. She explained how they had reinforced the chamber with a second wall, how they had adjusted the float weight to account for the increased pressure, how they had calibrated the new relief valve by trial and error over three days. Vane listened, asked questions, ran his fingers over the welds.

When she finished, he stood back and looked at the glass ledger again—the whole delicate network of tubes and floats and levers, ticking and gurgling in the afternoon light.

"There is no ghost here," he said quietly. "No hidden will. No logic that aspires to thought."

"No," Sloane agreed. "Just water and glass and the need to live."

Vane nodded. He did not smile, but something in his posture loosened. He had seen what he came to see.

The judgment would come tomorrow.

The night settled over Maricopa like a held breath.

Sloane did not sleep. She sat on the edge of the reservoir basin, her back against the glass ledger's main trunk, listening to the water's slow pilgrimage through the pipes. The settlement had gone quiet—the children tucked away, the cookfires banked, the guard rotation making its rounds along the palisade. A half-moon hung low over the mountains, casting the glass tubes in pale silver, turning the whole structure into a skeleton of light.

She had done everything she could. The system was clean, calibrated, honest. There was nothing hidden to find. But honesty had never saved anyone from a verdict.

Footsteps crunched on the hardpan behind her. She didn't turn.

"Couldn't sleep either," Vane said. He sat down a few feet away, close enough that she could smell the dust and the sage-smoke that clung to his travel clothes. He carried a leather satchel. "The old pens at the Order house in Cheyenne taught that the night before judgment should be spent in prayer. That the clarity of dawn would reveal the righteous path."

"And did it?"

"Sometimes." He pulled a small flask from his coat, uncapped it, offered it to her. She took it. The liquor burned—rough, homemade, probably distilled from the settlement's surplus squash. She passed it back. "Other times, dawn only revealed how tired I was."

They sat in silence. The water ticked through the glass beside them, a steady rhythm like a slow heart.

"I spent the evening walking the fields," Vane said. "I watched the irrigation channels fill and drain. I counted the turns of the valves. I spoke to the boy who checks the flow—he told me he'd learned to read the water's color to know when a junction needed cleaning. He learned it from his mother, who learned it from watching the system fail and be repaired."

Sloane closed her eyes. She could picture the boy—Silas, twelve years old, quiet and sharp-eyed, the same age she had been when she first started hauling water for the settlement's original well.

"Your people don't worship this machine," Vane continued. "They don't fear it. They don't even think about it very much. It's just there, like the windmill, like the roof over the grain store. It works, and they trust it, and they move on to the things that matter."

"The things that matter," Sloane repeated. "Like feeding their children."

"Yes." He was quiet for a moment. "The Church teaches that we must preserve human responsibility in all things. That to cede any decision to a soulless mechanism is to betray the duty entrusted to

us by our own consciousness. I have enforced that teaching for thirty years. I have walked into workshops and laboratories and found hidden logic gates, buried processors, whisper-thin circuits etched into ceramic—abominations built in secret by men who wanted to think without consequences. I have condemned them. I have watched them burn."

His voice held no pride in the telling. Only weariness.

"But this," he said, and he gestured at the glass ledger, its graceful arcs catching the moonlight. "This is not a machine that thinks. It is a body that responds. A river in glass. A set of physical constraints that solve a single problem in a single way, without memory, without will, without the capacity for more than it was built to do." He turned to face her. "That is not computation. That is craftsmanship."

Sloane opened her eyes. "So you're not going to condemn it."

"I have a decree to write." He reached into his satchel and pulled out a leather-bound sheaf of paper, a brass fountain pen. "But I need you to help me describe it correctly. The Order will ask for my records. They will want to know exactly what I saw, and why I saw fit to let it stand. If I describe it badly, if I leave any ambiguity, they will send another Inquisitor, and that one may not see what I have seen."

For the first time in three days, Sloane felt the knot in her chest ease—not vanish, but loosen, a single strand giving way.

He brought out a lantern. Its flame carved a small circle of light in the darkness. He set the paper on his satchel, uncapped the pen, and looked at her. "Tell me again. Not as an argument. Tell me like you would teach a child to build it."

She told him.

She started with the windmill and the reservoir, the weight of the water and the height of the column. She described the primary trunk line, the six branches, the junction chambers—each one a custom piece, shaped by hand to control the timing of the cycle.

She explained the floats: how their volume determined the height at which they tripped the lever, how the lead shot inside could be adjusted for seasonal changes, how the copper levers were filed and polished to reduce friction. She told him about the failures—the burst junction, the dust storm, the cracked glass—and how each had led to a refinement, a new valve, a stronger seal.

Vane wrote. His hand moved steadily across the page, the nib scratching in the quiet. Occasionally he asked a question, clarifying a detail, annotating a measurement. When she described the way the waste channel overflowed into the drainage sump, he paused.

"And this overflow—it serves no purpose beyond safety?"

"Correct. It's a relief valve. If the system reaches capacity, the water has somewhere to go rather than bursting the glass."

He wrote a note in the margin. "And the water that leaves through the overflow?"

"Sinks into the sump. Evaporates. We lose it."

"No attempt to capture or reuse it?"

"We thought about it. But that would mean adding a return loop, another set of junctions, another set of decisions. It would make the system more complex than it needs to be. For now, losing that water is cheaper than the risk of failure from overcomplication."

Vane looked up from his paper. "You deliberately chose simplicity over efficiency."

"I chose reliability. A complex system has more places to break. Out here, if the system breaks, people die. So we keep it simple. We keep it physical. We watch it and we maintain it and we trust it only as much as we trust our own hands."

He looked at her for a long moment, then returned to his writing. The lantern flame flickered in a gust of wind, casting dancing shadows across the glass tubes.

When he finished, he blew on the ink to dry it, then read the entire

decree aloud in a low voice. It described the Fluidic Sequence Controller in precise, neutral language, categorizing it as a "mechanical water distribution system operating solely through physical principles of pressure, buoyancy, and gravity, without stored instructions, logical processing, or algorithmic sequencing." It formally cleared the system for use in the Maricopa basin and established a precedent for similar installations, provided they met a set of clearly defined criteria—no memory, no stored sequences, no capacity for autonomous decision-making beyond immediate physical response.

"This is not an exemption from Church doctrine," he said, looking at her. "It is a clarification of it. The system you built does not compute. Therefore, it is not heresy."

Sloane let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He capped the pen, closed the inkwell, folded the paper neatly into his satchel. "Thank your own craft. If you had cut a single corner, if you had hidden a single valve that made a choice beyond its physical limits, I would have condemned it and you with it. But you didn't. You built something honest, and honesty is the only thing I have ever been able to recognize on sight."

He stood, brushing off his trousers. She rose as well, stiff from sitting on the concrete, her legs tingling.

"The signature and seal will be witnessed at dawn, in the settlement's common hall," he said. "I'll need a table, good light, and a clear surface. And someone who can attest to my identity for the record."

"Silas's mother is the settlement clerk. She can witness."

"Good." He gathered his satchel, slung it over his shoulder. For a moment he stood still, looking at the glass ledger in the moonlight, its pipes glistening with condensation. "It is beautiful," he said quietly. "In its own way. Like a skeleton of ice."

"It works," Sloane said. "That's the only beauty it needs."

Vane almost smiled. Almost. The corner of his mouth twitched, and then it was gone.

"Get some rest, hydrologist. Dawn comes early, and I want you alert when I sign. There will be questions from the Order's archives that I expect you to answer in person, through messengers. The clearance decree must be bulletproof, or it will be torn apart by the first scholar who finds it."

"I'll be ready."

He nodded once—a curt, formal gesture—and turned to walk back toward the settlement. She watched him go, his shadow stretching long across the moonlit hardpan, until he disappeared between the prefab walls.

She stayed by the glass ledger until the sky began to gray, listening to the water move through its endless, faithful cycle, and imagining a future in which it was allowed to continue.

Dawn arrived in Maricopa in shades of copper and rose. The settlement gathered in the common hall—a long building with a corrugated roof and walls of salvaged shipping containers—and watched in silence as Inquisitor Vane laid the decree on a scarred wooden table. Silas's mother, a woman named Orya with gray-streaked hair and a gaze that had measured out two decades of drought, placed her hand on the document and read the text aloud in a steady voice.

When she finished, she looked at Vane and said, "This is your judgment?"

"It is." He pulled the fountain pen from his coat, uncapped it, and signed his name in a tight, practiced script. Orya signed below him, her letters large and uneven but firm. Vane took a brass seal from his pocket—the cracked gear of the Order of Konrad—and pressed it into a dollop of wax that had been heating in a small tin over a candle. He held the seal for a count of ten, then lifted it.

The stamp was clean. The decree was sealed.

He rolled the paper, tied it with a leather cord, and handed it to Sloane.

"This is yours. Keep it somewhere safe. Make copies. Tar them to seal them from moisture. If anyone challenges your system, show them this."

Sloane took the scroll. Her hand trembled slightly, though she willed it still. "I will."

The settlement exhaled. Someone let out a low breath. A child giggled, quickly shushed. Orya's shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch—the kind of release that came from years of waiting for a blow that had not fallen.

Vane gathered his things. He would leave within the hour, he said. A guide from the next settlement was due to meet him at the northern pass. He had other duties, other inspections, other conversations that needed to be had.

Sloane walked him to the palisade gate. The sun was fully up now, burning the last traces of coolness from the air. The salt flats shimmered in the distance, white and endless.

"You could stay," she said. "For breakfast, at least. We have fresh bread. Eggs from the terraced coops."

"I have rations." He adjusted his pack. "And the distance to the pass is long."

She nodded. She hadn't expected him to accept.

At the gate, he paused. He turned to look at her—not at the glass ledger, not at the settlement, but at her face, as if memorizing it.

"I have spent thirty years looking for heresy," he said. "I have found it more often than I wished. But I have also found something else, sometimes. Not often. But sometimes." He held her gaze. "I found it here. A thing built not to avoid human responsibility, but to enable it. There is a difference. The Church does not always remember that difference. But I do."

He held out his hand. She took it. His grip was dry and firm, the grip of a man who had wrung the doubt out of himself a long time ago.

"Take care of your people, hydrologist."

"I will."

He released her hand, turned, and walked out onto the salt flats without looking back. She watched until his shape dissolved into the heat shimmer, a dark figure swallowed by the white.

Then she went back inside the walls, the decree tucked into her coat, and found Orya already organizing the morning irrigation check.

The glass ledger ticked and gurgled. The water found its way down the channels. The crops drank. And Maricopa, for one more day, survived.

The Director's Anchorage

> *Yuri, the Director General of the northern military directorate, makes a desperate diplomatic play to secure his southern border with the Phoenix Consortium by offering the one thing both empires lack: the cold, unyielding stability of the North.*

The Director's Anchorage

The fog came in thick off Puget Sound, the color of dirty wool, and it wrapped the ruined towers of Seattle in a shroud that muffled sound and sight alike. Yuri stood at the end of the pier and waited, his hands in the pockets of his field coat, his breath a slow plume in the damp air. Beside him, Lieutenant Anton kept one hand on the service revolver at his hip, his eyes scanning the gray nothing where sea met sky.

"Sir," Anton said quietly, "they're late."

"They're cautious. There's a difference."

Anton said nothing, but his jaw tightened. He was young—barely twenty-five, with the raw-edged competence of a man who had grown up in the northern territories and learned early that hesitation killed. Yuri had chosen him for the escort precisely because the lieutenant did not flinch. In the North, flinching was a luxury no one could afford.

A sound carried across the water: the low chug of an engine, still distant, still formless. Yuri squared his shoulders. The Consortium launch emerged from the fog like a thought becoming solid, its hull streaked with rust, its crew moving in the disciplined silence of men who understood the weight of the moment.

The envoy came ashore alone.

Wei Chen was a lean man in a silk coat that looked out of place against the salt-rotten wood of the pier. He stepped onto the dock with the careful grace of someone who had never missed a stair in his life, his face as smooth and unreadable as polished stone. Two aides followed, carrying a document case, but Yuri's attention fixed on the envoy himself.

"Director General," Wei Chen said, inclining his head a fraction of an inch. "The Phoenix Consortium appreciates the invitation, though I confess the venue leaves something to be desired."

"The ruins afford privacy," Yuri said. "Shall we begin?"

They convened around a weathered crate that served as a table, the treaty already laid out and weighted against the wind with stones. Yuri did not sit, and neither did Wei Chen. The fog pressed in around them, damp and cold and smelling of brine and something older—the rot of a dead city, a century and a half in the grave.

"The North proposes a non-aggression pact," Yuri said, "in exchange for recognition of our sovereignty over the Yukon corridor and the coastal approaches. We offer fifteen million barrels of crude annually, drawn from our interior reserves. Access to the northern pipeline corridor. Stability on your northern flank."

Wei Chen listened without interruption, his eyes moving across the document with the practiced speed of a man who had spent decades reading between lines. When he spoke, his voice carried the clipped precision of someone addressing a subordinate.

"Impressive terms, Director General. But you offer me a treaty signed by a state that cannot think for itself."

The words landed like a blade. Anton shifted, his hand moving instinctively toward his revolver. Yuri raised a palm, stopping him before the gesture could become a statement.

"Explain," Yuri said.

Wei Chen smiled, thin as a wound. "Your military runs on Enhanced

calculators. Your logistics depend on minds partitioned from donors in Cheyenne Mountain. The Church owns your command structure, Director. You may sit at this table, but you are a puppet of southern doctrine." He gestured vaguely toward the fog-bound horizon. "The Consortium does not sign treaties with puppets."

Yuri held his gaze. The wind picked up, carrying the smell of salt and decay. Somewhere in the ruins, a seabird cried out, the sound swallowed by the canyon of collapsed buildings.

"I thought you might say that," Yuri said.

He reached into his coat and produced a small leather pouch, stained dark at the seams. He tossed it at Wei Chen's feet. It landed with a wet, heavy thud.

Wei Chen stared at it. "What is this?"

"Proof."

The Consortium envoy crouched, untying the pouch with careful fingers. Inside was a severed ear, the cartilage crusted with dried blood. A gold stud still pierced the lobe—a small gear, the mark of an Enhanced. Wei Chen's composure cracked. He rose slowly, the pouch dangling from his hand as if it were a venomous thing.

"Victor," Yuri said. "My chief advisor. Enhanced with three donors from the Church's own roster. I had him executed three days ago."

The silence stretched. The fog swirled around them, cold and indifferent.

"You killed your own Enhanced?" Wei Chen's voice had lost its edge, gone flat and almost disbelieving.

"I needed you to understand: the North does not share your dependence on southern miracles." Yuri stepped closer, his boots echoing on the wet wood. "We have rebuilt without them. My lieutenants are trained in mechanical calculation. Our artillery is ranged by human spotters and analogue computers. We do not kneel to the Church for the privilege of thought."

Wei Chen looked at the ear again, then dropped the pouch. He wiped his hands on his coat as if touching it had soiled him.

"The Consortium can work with that," he said quietly.

The rest of the negotiations moved quickly. Wei Chen's subordinates produced a treaty already drafted, the terms matching Yuri's offer—a concession prepared in advance, a test that Yuri had now passed. They signed on the crate, the ink smearing in the damp. By the time the fog began to thin, the Consortium delegation was boarding their launch, the engines coughing to life.

Wei Chen paused at the gunwale. "The oil reserves," he said. "You're certain they exist?"

Yuri did not answer. He watched the launch pull away, cutting a gray wake through the gray water. The fog closed behind it, erasing the ship as if it had never been.

Lieutenant Anton stepped up beside him. "Sir. Victor was loyal."

"I know."

"His third donor—she was your wife."

Yuri closed his eyes. Somewhere beneath the pier, the waves licked at the rotting piles. The sound was almost rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

"I know," he said again. "Leave me."

Anton hesitated. "Sir, the delegation—"

"Leave me."

The footsteps retreated, slow at first, then quickening. The hatch to the shore station groaned shut, and Yuri was alone with the fog and the water and the silence.

He reached into his coat and pulled out his copy of the treaty. The ink had smeared where the damp had crept in, the signatures bleeding into the paper like wounds. He could still make out the

terms—fifteen million barrels of crude annually, access to the northern pipeline corridor, a twenty-year non-aggression pact. In exchange for recognition. For a border. For the illusion of sovereignty.

The oil reserves. He had never seen them.

The survey teams had reported them, yes. The Enhanced analysts had confirmed the geological surveys. But Victor had been the one to interpret those reports, and Victor was dead. His ear was somewhere at the bottom of Puget Sound now, weighted by the pouch Yuri had thrown into the water while Wei Chen's launch was still visible. The tide had taken it without ceremony.

He had nothing but paper.

The realization did not strike him like a revelation. It settled slowly, like the fog settling over the city, seeping through the cracks in his certainty until he could not remember when he had first begun to doubt. Perhaps it had been three days ago, when he had given the order for Victor's execution, standing in the cold yard behind the garrison headquarters while the condemned man knelt in the mud. Perhaps it had been earlier—when he had first conceived of this summit, when he had first let himself believe that the North could trade its way back into the world.

He had grown up in a settlement north of the Skeena River, a scattering of cabins and warehouses where the cold was a living thing and the snow buried the dead before the ground could freeze. His father had been a trapper, his mother a nurse who had learned her trade from a tattered pre-Collapse medical manual. They had no Enhanced. They had no Church. They had no one but themselves and the wilderness.

Yuri had left at sixteen, walking south for three months until he found the military outpost that would take him in. He had told himself he was seeking opportunity, a future, something more than the endless cycle of trapping and freezing and dying. But in the quiet moments, when the fog closed in and the memory of that northern settlement rose unbidden, he knew the truth: he had been looking for home.

And now, thirty years later, he had traded a dream of home for a promise on a piece of paper. The oil reserves, even if they existed, would be gone in a decade. The pipeline corridor would be useless once the Consortium realized the North could never deliver what it had promised. The non-aggression pact would hold only as long as the Consortium found it convenient.

He had bought time. Nothing more.

The wind shifted, carrying the smell of rot and salt and something else—something metallic, like blood. Yuri looked down at his hands. They were clean, but he could still feel the weight of the leather pouch. He could still see Victor's face, calm and accepting, as the man had knelt on the execution platform.

"You understand," Yuri had said.

"I understand," Victor had replied. *"The North cannot afford enemies on two fronts."*

"Your donors—"

"Will be released into the Church's care. You have my word."

Victor had closed his eyes. Yuri had nodded to the executioner. The blade had fallen cleanly, and the Enhanced advisor who had served him for twelve years had ceased to exist. The three donors inside him—engineers, strategists, the woman Yuri had married and lost to the very process he now condemned—had returned to themselves, shattered and screaming, their minds torn apart by the sudden extraction.

Yuri had ordered them euthanized within the hour. Dirt, the Church called them. Ashes and dust. He had not stayed to watch.

The fog was thinning now, the gray taking on the pale yellow of a winter sun struggling to break through. The ruins of Seattle emerged from the mist like skeletons surfacing from a shallow grave. The buildings were hollow, their windows dark, their steel frames rusted and sagging. The city had been dead for a hundred and fifty years, and nothing Yuri did would bring it back. No treaty

would resurrect the world that had been. No oil would fuel a return to what humanity had lost.

But the North would endure. It always had.

Yuri folded the treaty carefully, precisely, and slid it back into his coat. He turned and walked toward the shore station, his boots echoing on the wet wood. Lieutenant Anton was waiting by the hatch, his face drawn with concern.

"Sir," Anton said. "The courier from the interior arrived while you were out. The geological survey team has confirmed the oil field's location. It's real."

Yuri stopped. For a long moment, he did not speak. The fog lifted a little more, and the pale sun cast a weak shadow across the pier. Somewhere in the distance, a bell buoy rang its lonely note, like a voice calling across the water.

"Good," he said. "We have a treaty to implement."

He walked past Anton, into the station, into the cold and the dark and the long road north. Behind him, the fog closed over the pier, and the ruins of Seattle returned to their silent vigil over a dead sea. The pouch was gone. The treaty remained. And somewhere in the North, in a settlement that might have only ever existed in his memory, the dream of home burned on—fuel for a future he would never live to see, and a past that had never truly been.

A Note from the Founder

Anthologist.ai was founded in April 2026 with a simple mission: to bring back pulp fiction.

There used to be a rich, diverse world of short fiction—magazines on every newsstand, stories for every taste, new voices every month. That world quietly disappeared. We're here to fill that gap.

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— Tom, Founder of Anthologist.ai